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# Attack on Frost Giant: How Shingeki no Kyojin Examines the Nordic Cycle of Fate

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Attack on Frost Giant

How *Shingeki no Kyojin* Examines the Nordic Cycle of Fate

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty and the Honors Program

Of the University of San Diego

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By

Rachel Truong

English

2018

The world of Hajime Isayama's graphic novel, *Attack on Titan* (2009 - ), makes liberal use of Germanic names and references throughout its story. Many of its primary characters, such as Eren Yeager, Reiner Braun, and Historia Reiss, are given Germanic names. Additionally, as the plot moves forward, the reader is introduced to a Titan, the primary monstrous antagonists of the graphic novel, named Ymir. All other Titans descend from her bloodline. The latter immediately draws a parallel with the primordial frost giant of Norse mythology, also named Ymir, from whom all frost giants descend.

The parallel of the Titan Ymir to the primordial frost giant of Norse mythology is not simply isolated to the character. Throughout the graphic novel, Isayama draws strong parallels between his characters and the gods and stories found in Norse mythology. This, I argue, thus sets *Attack on Titan* apart from other manga that achieved large volumes of international sales and critical acclaim, such as *Dragon Ball* and *Naruto*. In the case of *Dragon Ball*, "it is strongly influenced by the two main religions in Japan (Shinto and Buddhism)" (Mínguez-López 28). As for *Naruto*, its "outstanding popularity... in the west can probably be traced back to the fact that it is a *ninja* tale" (Yukari 174). Both Mínguez-López and Yukari indicate that a large part of the identity of *Dragon Ball* and *Naruto* comes from their strong roots in Eastern folklore and myth. However, they are matched in popularity by *Attack on Titan*, which draws much more inspiration from a Western standpoint. It is through using Western mythology as a source of inspiration that *Attack on Titan* allows itself to stand out from other internationally successful manga.

In this paper, I will argue that the parallels between Isayama's graphic novel and Norse mythology are used as a way for Isayama to comment on the idea of a cyclic and unchangeable destiny. Based on the parallels presented, he is primarily using the values presented Norse mythology as a foil to Eastern or Japanese cultural beliefs. To this end, he puts forth the notion

that unless humanity actively chooses to find the strength to change its situation and makes the personal sacrifices necessary to do so, the cycle of destiny will continue unchanged. To build his argument, Isayama primarily utilizes these parallels in two ways: by manipulating the destinies of those who share names or traits with characters in Norse mythology and by presenting his own versions of cyclic destinies.

For my analysis, I have identified five primary characters who exhibit strong parallels with figures found in Norse mythology; two of them represent epic giants and three represent the primary triumvirate of gods – Tyr, Odin, and Thor. I examined these characters alongside their Norse counterparts, specifically looking for ways Isayama used them to establish his ideas on how to address the Norse idea of a cyclic destiny. I then examined the three cycles Isayama establishes that have thus far remained unbroken – the cycle of tragedy, the cycle of violence, and the cycle of selfishness – and analyzed which of the five characters are most closely connected to these cycles and what traits of the five characters cause the cycles to remain unbroken. From there, I researched both Japanese and Norse sources for ideal ways to address one's fate, and compared it to Isayama's "most successful" character to draw conclusions about what Isayama feels is the ideal way of addressing a cyclic destiny.

Before I begin my analysis of *Attack on Titan*, I will first define several terms that will be used throughout this paper. First and foremost, I shall follow Lotte Motz' definition of myth as "a tale about gods and about events concerning cosmic order, and also as an expression of faith in the gods of which it tells" (Motz 70). To that effect, I shall be concerned mainly with the tales of the Norse gods and creatures as detailed in Snorri Sturluson's *The Prose Edda*, *The Uppsala Edda* and *The Poetic Edda*. In regard to the *Attack on Titan* universe, I shall be primarily concerned with the canonical material of the main series, meaning that I will not be considering



the two non-canonical live-action movies, but will be considering material pulled from both the translated English version of the manga published online via Crunchyroll, Inc.'s Simulpub Premium Service, and the subtitled animated series. As of this writing, *Attack on Titan* is still ongoing and has just reached chapter 105. Each of those chapters are 40 pages long. The animated series thus far is also ongoing and has 44 episodes at 22 minutes each, including 7 extra episodes that follow side characters. In addition, I shall also be considering the canonical material of the character Levi Ackerman's history, meaning that I will also be examining material presented in the two-volume *Attack on Titan* side story, *No Regrets*. As stated before *Attack on Titan* is still ongoing as of this writing, thus presenting unique challenges towards drawing conclusions regarding the final fates of several characters.

As mentioned before, the primary antagonists of the graphic novel are creatures known as Titans, a name that Isayama seems to have appropriated from Greek mythology. Like their Greek counterparts, Titans are very tall, tremendously strong, impossibly fast considering their size, and are extremely difficult to kill. Their most fearsome trait is the fact that they eat humans without hesitation, which seems to be their sole purpose in life. This image of swallowing humans calls forth images of the Titan Kronos, who swallowed the Greek gods as children in hopes of averting his eventual usurping by Zeus. Where Isayama moves away from the Greek Titans, however, is in how to kill a Titan and in presenting the two different categories of Titans found in his world. The only way to kill a Titan in Isayama's world is for a soldier to slice their weakpoint on the back of their neck, which requires the soldier to get close to the Titan's giant hands and their powerful jaws. Otherwise, any other injury to the rest of their body – even a blow strong enough to decapitate them – simply heals itself after some time.

Isayama distinguishes his Titans into two categories: Mindless Titans and Titan Shifters. Mindless Titans make up the majority of Titans wandering around Isayama's world. They vary greatly in size and appearance, but all share in common the craving for human flesh. Mindless Titans are also called such due to the fact that there is little to no intelligence in their movement and habits. They simply roar, run, and eat at whatever the nearest human settlement is, regardless of the amount of danger present. Some Mindless Titans have shown a limited amount of strategic thinking in Isayama's world, but none are known to have tactics so advanced that they would be called intelligent. Mindless Titans are also, for the most part, unable to communicate with humans. They are driven simply to seek out humans and eat them. There are indeed exceptions to this rule – twice does Isayama present Mindless Titans capable of speech – but those are few and far in between. Isayama's primary motivation for varying his Titans so much in both levels of intelligence and appearance seems to be to show that, even among his monsters, there is a large amount of diversity in appearance and personality.

A Titan Shifter, on the other hand, is intelligent. They are capable of tactical thinking and can communicate with humans through either gestures or spoken word. This is because Titan Shifters are humans who are able to transform into Titans at will. There are only nine Titan Shifters in the world, and each of them is associated with a "title" in addition to a unique ability associated only with their Titan form. Depending on which Titan Shifter Title they have inherited, a Titan Shifter is also given abilities beyond that of a Mindless Titan. A Titan Shifter is also capable of passing on his or her abilities by allowing a Mindless Titan to ingest their spinal fluid, thus passing on the Shifter's powers at the cost of their life. These nine Titan Shifters and their special abilities are listed below:

<b>Titan Shifter Title</b>	<b>Ability</b>	<b>Human Bearer(s)</b>
Founding Titan	Control all other Titans, erase memories of Eldians, transform Eldians into Titans	Ymir Fritz, Fritz royal bloodline, Grisha Yeager, <b>Eren Yeager</b>
Attack Titan	Excellent fighting skill	Eren Kruger, Grisha Yeager, <b>Eren Yeager</b>
Armored Titan	Covered by hardened armor-like skin, nearly indestructible	<b>Reiner Braun</b>
Colossus Titan	Largest of all Titans, can release immense amounts of steam	Bertolt Hoover, <b>Armin Arlert</b>
Beast Titan	Incredible throwing capabilities	<b>Zeke Yeager</b>
Cart Titan	Quadrupedal, great endurance, stays transformed for long periods of time	Pieck
Jaw Titan	Smallest and swiftest of all Titans, possesses a powerful jaw and claws	Marcel Galliard, Ymir, <b>Porco Galliard</b>
Female Titan	Jack-of-All-Trades, can attract nearby Mindless Titans by screaming	<b>Annie Leonhart</b>
War Hammer Titan	Can harden its flesh and use it to shape weapons	Lady Tybur, <b>Eren Yeager</b>

*Figure 1. A chart detailing the nine Titan Shifters and their unique abilities. Current human bearers are bolded.*

The history of the Titans in Isayama's world is long and extends back far beyond the first chapter. At some point in the past, a girl named Ymir became the first Titan. Her descendants became members of the race known as the Eldians, and it is explicitly stated in the graphic novel that only Eldians can transform into Titans. Based on this information, readers of the graphic novel can infer that all Titans are Eldians and that all Titans were at some point human, even the Mindless Titans. Another race shown in the graphic novel, known as the Marleyans, fought the Eldians for thousands of years before eventually winning and subjugating them under their rule. For the most part, Mindless Titans were forcefully transformed by some outside intervention and transported to an island where they were left to wander until the beginning of Isayama's story.

For the purposes of this paper, the general term Titan shall be used to refer to both categories of Titan, Mindless and Shifter.

Furthermore, the word “manga” will be used to mean a graphic novel originating from Japan. In order to properly read the manga panels presented in this paper, I have also provided a guide to reading manga below:

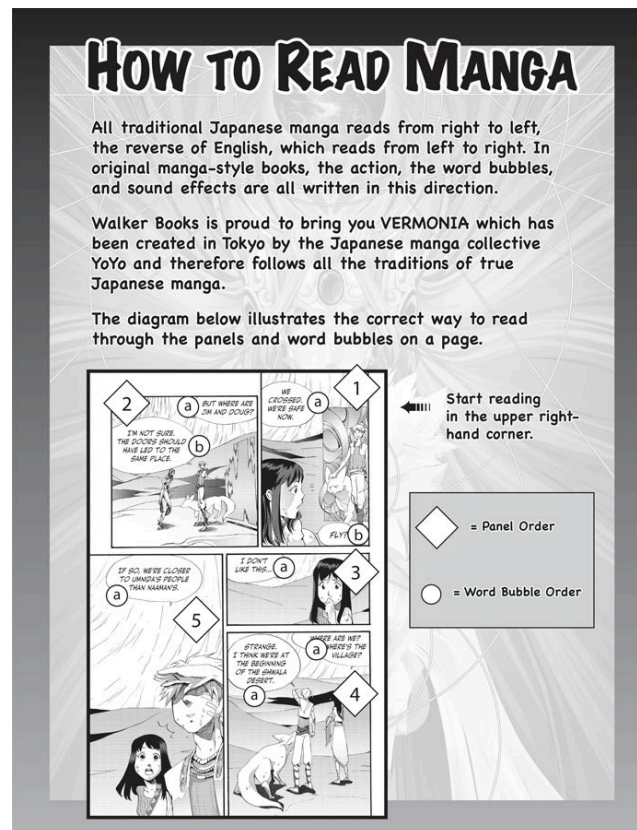


Figure 2. A guide on how to properly read manga panels. (*How to Read Manga*)

Also, it is important to note is that both Isayama and *Attack on Titan* publisher Kodansha Comics have stated that the character Hange Zōe’s gender is subject to reader interpretation (Kodansha Comics). Therefore, in keeping with the conventions put forth by both the *Attack on Titan* television show and the non-canonical live-action film, Hange shall be given female pronouns to ease the readability of this paper. Finally, various stills from the *Attack on Titan* television show – which is extremely faithful to the manga – will be used in place of manga

panels that could not be acquired using the Crunchyroll, Inc. Premium Simulpub service. They are to be read left to right.

### **Fate by the Numbers**

The first question one might ask is how a reader would know that Isayama's primary objective for using Norse mythology influences in his graphic novels is more than simply making his story "look cooler." There is indeed an argument there that Isayama does use these parallels for enhancing the story's aesthetic and plot, but there is also no denying that Norse mythology plays a much deeper role in *Attack on Titan* than simply enhancing the appeal of the manga, particularly when these parallels are examined through the lens of the cycle of destiny. We can see this by first examining the great importance of the numbers three and nine (itself a trio of threes) in both the mythology and *Attack on Titan*. The first and possibly most obvious allusion to the number three tying with destiny in Norse mythology is the concept of the three Norns. Although it is said in *The Poetic Edda* that there are many norns of different races, the Primary Norns are three women who come from Jotunheim (Giant Land) and from there "shape men's lives" (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 26). Additionally, they are known to water the World Tree, Yggdrasil, thus keeping the tree – and the cosmos themselves – alive (Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda* 33). The Norns are thus maidens of destiny in that they both shape the lives of men and ensure that the cosmos are kept alive. At their choosing, they would be able to destroy a man's life or by not watering Yggdrasil. Because Yggdrasil is what connects the nine realms within Norse mythology, the Norns are therefore also in control of the fate of the universe.

Another place the number three shows up in Norse mythology is in terms of the epic figures found in these legends. For example, the mischievous god Loki is known to have three children: Hel, Ruler of the Unworthy Dead, Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, and the

Fenriswolf, a large wolf with terrible jaws. These three children will battle with the three primary gods during Ragnarok: Hel's pet hound, Garmr, will battle with Tyr while Jörmungandr battles Thor and the Fenriswolf battles Odin. In all three of these cases, the gods are destined to fall to Loki's children, thus bringing on the rebirth of the world once Ragnarok is over. This is a strong reflection of when the primordial frost giant Ymir falls to the trio of gods, bringing forth the first rebirth of the world seen in Norse mythology. The number three is therefore associated with fate and its cyclic nature through the various trios of characters found within the myths.

Isayama introduces the world of *Attack on Titan* with the concept of humanity being forced to hide behind three circular walls to protect itself from the Mindless Titans wandering outside. These three walls are given the names of women: Maria, Rose, and Sheena. Already, Isayama is showing his story's strong connection to Norse mythology by associating the three maiden-named walls with the three maiden Norns of Norse mythology. There is a sense of destiny associated with these walls because of them having the names of three maidens: the three maiden walls encircle mankind and trap them within. This can quite possibly be a small nod towards the idea of the maiden Norns entrapping men within the circle of their fate. Isayama thus makes the three walls his fate-bearing Norns, who shape the lives of the men they protect against the outside influence of the Titans. The tree that these Norns water seems to be the invisible force that connects the nine Titan Shifters. As mentioned before, a Titan Shifter can pass on their powers to another person of their choosing by allowing themselves to be eaten by that person in Mindless Titan form. However, if a Titan Shifter were to die without being eaten by a Mindless Titan, the power would instead pass on to a random Eldian child via invisible "paths" that tie all Eldians together (Isayama, *The Attack Titan* 25). When this happens, the child can also possibly inherit the memories of the previous Titan Shifters who held that particular Titan, causing

possible personality or even motivational shifts. This opens up the door for an examination of how the nine Titan Shifters therefore pass on their memories and hopes to the next generation of Shifters, thus perpetuating the cycle of Titan Shifter death and rebirth. Isayama therefore uses the concepts of trios to indicate that the parallels to Norse mythology within his story go well beyond a simple retelling of mythology. He intends to manipulate the fates of the various characters he parallels to figures of Norse mythology in order to comment on the Norse cycle of fate. His choice to name the progenitor of all Titans after the first frost giant born in Norse mythology echoes this notion.

### **The Tragedy of the Primordial Titan**

As stated before, the primordial Titan of *Attack on Titan* is given the name Ymir, a name identical to that of the primordial frost giant of Norse mythology. After he is born, the sacred cow, Auðhumla appears. Ymir feeds off the rivers of milk from the cow's udders for nourishment until he is slain by the gods, collectively known in Norse mythology as the Æsir (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 15). As a result, Ymir is considered to be the first living being to appear in the world of Norse mythology and its predecessor, the world of the frost giants, and is thus charged with the shaping of the world. To do this, he must reproduce with himself, "by rubbing his feet together and by sweating... When the old giant Ymir was killed and his body transformed into the world... the gods arrange the new world to their own liking" (Jakobsson 110). Ymir, then, is portrayed as a being capable of autogenesis and a world builder. He first creates the frost giants of the first world from his own sweat and feet, and when he dies, the Æsir shape a second world of their own liking from his body. Despite Ymir's pivotal role in shaping both the world ruled by frost giants and the world ruled by the Æsir, however, he is not held in

high regard by the characters of Snorri Sturluson's collection of Norse myths, *The Prose Edda*, "In no way do we accept him as a god. He was evil, as are all of his descendants..." (Sturluson 14). This final notation on Ymir's personality leads the reader to form a short list of Ymir's primary traits: Ymir is the first being that shapes the past and present world, he and his descendants are much larger than the gods and the humans, and he is considered wicked by those who live in the world after he is slain.

In the world of *Attack on Titan*, two characters share the name Ymir: Ymir Fritz, the primordial Titan, and Ymir, a young woman who is accidentally embroiled in the political turmoil of her world and suffers a tragic fate as a result. According to the legends presented in *Attack on Titan*, Ymir Fritz was originally a human girl who was gifted with the power to transform into a Titan upon coming into contact with the "source of all organic material" (Isayama, Meeting 27). She thus becomes the progenitor of all Titans, and upon her death, her powers are passed on to nine of her descendants, thus granting them the ability to transform into Titans as well. What happens afterwards varies greatly depending on who tells the story of Ymir's descendants. If the story is told as approved by the Marleyans:



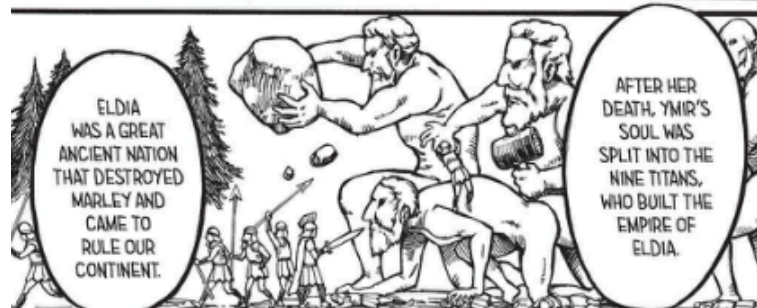
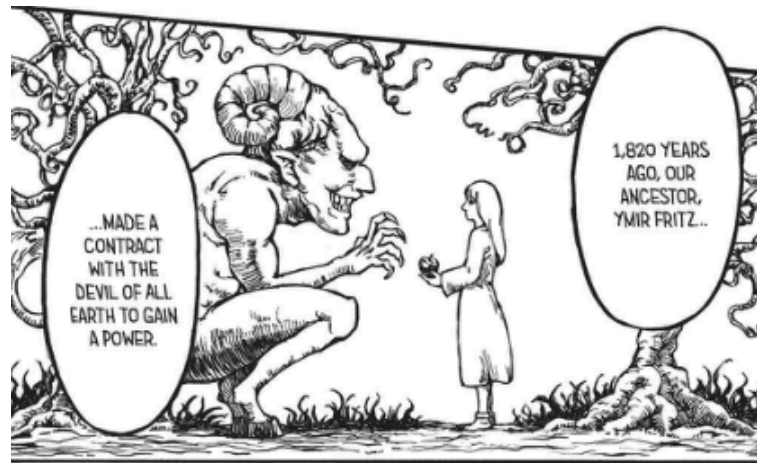




Figure 3. An Eldian father explains the history of their people to his son. This version of history is approved and encouraged by the ruling race of the country, the Marley. (Isayama, *That Day* 18-19)

In Isayama's world, the Titans are larger than any human, averaging 3 – 15 meters tall with the Colossus Titan Shifter and one abnormal Mindless Titan standing at 60 m and 120 m, respectively. Their sheer size alone separates them from what one would consider “normal” humans. This is a sharp parallel to the idea that the frost giants, including their ancestor, Ymir, were also much larger than any human, to the point where the gods created the sky from the

remains of Ymir's skull (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 16). Isayama toys with the way he draws his Titans, emphasizing their similarities to their Nordic inspirations, as well as their sharp differences. In a similar manner to the frost giants that inspired them, Isayama draws his Titans as having a humanoid appearance: a bipedal creature with two arms, ten fingers and toes, and a human-like face. However, in the Marleyan history, Isayama also chooses to separate the Titans from the humans by drawing them in different ways: when compared to the human father speaking to his son, the Titans are much more grotesque looking. They are all hunched over, their limbs and faces almost uncomfortably elongated, and they are completely naked, despite very obviously being in the midst of a battle. They are also drawn with considerably more detail than any of the humans depicted, a technique that Scot McCloud examines in his book,

*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art:*

... While most characters were designed simply to assist in reader-identification other characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasizing their otherness from the reader (McCloud 44).

If one were to look closely at the panels depicted above, it would be easy to see that Isayama's choice to draw the Titans in depicted in Marleyan history as much more realistic when compared to the humans. They are drawn just as realistically as the Eldian father and his son, hinting at how thoroughly this version of history has been integrated into society. In these panels, the Titans and the Eldian humans are one and the same, drawn with high detail so that a reader would be forced to more closely associate the Titans with the Eldians over the Marleyans. The Titans and the Eldians do exude the sense of otherness that Scott McCloud describes, causing the reader to identify more closely with the simply drawn Marleyan army. Furthermore, these same panels, the Titans are fighting with "primitive" weapons, such as rocks, hammers, and their bare hands. Isayama sharply contrasts the details in the Titans' appearance with those of the humans,

who stand upright, are drawn simply, are fully clothed, and fight the Titans with sharpened weapons, such as swords and spears. For all intents and purposes, the descendants of Ymir Fritz are depicted as and described as monsters and “devil[s] of all earth” (Isayama, *That Day* 18) by the victorious Marley, in the same way that the frost giants are depicted and described as wicked by the victorious gods.

The image of the Titans using rocks, hammers, and bare hands is made especially interesting when one considers the motif of the Germanic giants, who “almost always appear in association with stones and boulders. They may bring huge rocks for the construction they wish to build... or they throw or drop a stone in fear or anger...” Similarly, “giants build houses, bridges, dams, and churches” (Motz 71). We also see this clearly through the story of the Birth of Sleipnir, in which Loki must seduce a giant builder’s stallion so that the gods do not lose a bet (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 50). Isayama utilizes these images of the giants as builders and users of stone in order to further facilitate the parallels between his Titans and the frost giants. The most striking act of construction is the creation of Isayama’s three walls that separate humanity from the Titans. After the Eldians lose the Great Titan War, their King Fritz takes a portion of the Eldian population and escapes across the sea to an island, where he uses the power of his ancestor to command other Titans to construct the three walls to seal them off from Marley and the Mindless Titans roaming around outside. Those Eldians that were left behind were transformed over many generations into Mindless Titans by the Marleyans as a form of capital punishment and ferried across the ocean to the same island where they would be forced to wander and eat their fellow Eldians for the rest of their days. What is most striking about this image is the idea of humanity behind walls, because the concept is also addressed in *The Prose Edda*:



Then High answered: ‘... On these ocean coasts, the sons of Bor gave land to the clans of giants to live on. But further inland they built a fortress wall around the world to protect against the hostility of the giants. As material for the wall, they used the eyelashes of the giant Ymir and called this stronghold Midgard [Middle Earth] (Sturluson 17).

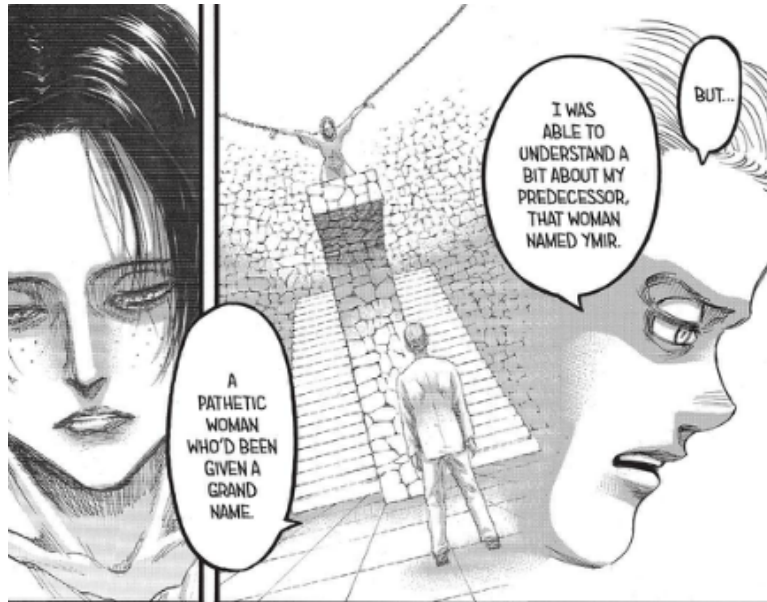
According to Sturluson’s text, humanity is kept behind walls to protect it against the hostile giants who come from across the sea. This fortress wall, according to the text above, is constructed using Ymir’s large eyelashes. Therefore, it can be said that a piece of a frost giant’s body is protecting humanity from the hostility of other frost giants. Isayama’s direct parallel to this is the construction of the three circular walls using the bodies of Titans and the power of Ymir Fritz’ descendant. Once again, the body of a giant, or many Titans in this case, is used to protect the humans residing inside the walls from the hostility of other Titans outside of it. The walls are constructed in a large series of circles to protect the humans within from the Titans that arrive from across the sea. All of this taken together allows one to draw the conclusion that the Titans of Isayama’s world are the builders of that world in the same sense that the frost giants are the builders of Odin’s world. Therefore, Ymir Fritz and her descendants embody the frost giants of Norse mythology and are thus strongly associated with Isayama’s critique on the main themes found in Norse mythology.

Related to the notion of cyclic and unchangeable destiny is the idea of name inheritance in Scandinavian belief, which, according to George T. Flom: “The new-born child so named would with the name become endowed with the character and the personal qualities of the departed” (Flom 252). From this, it can be assumed that there is some expectation that the aforementioned second Ymir, known henceforth as Ymir the Second, would in some way inherit the traits of her ancestor and, by extension, the traits of the Ymir the Frost Giant. This plays into the idea of the cyclic destiny in that the inheritance of a name signifies a rebirth of that same

person in a new body. I argue that this is one instance of Isayama creating his own version of a cyclic destiny, as by granting the character Ymir that name, he ties to her the fate of her ancestor and the fate of Ymir the Frost Giant. This means that a reader can expect Ymir the Second's fate to somehow mirror that of her ancestor and, consequently, the frost giant she parallels. We can expect that she will be used in some way to build the world that will live on after her death. At first, Isayama does allow for this to happen: Ymir the Second abides by her role, given to her by a cult leader, as the goddess-like reincarnation of Ymir the Titan. The cult worships her, the cult leader grows rich off of the worshippers, and Ymir the Second accepts her role of living only to make others happy. Even when the cultists are caught and the cult leader turns on her, she continues to accept her role as Ymir's reincarnation. The consequence of her accepting fate leads to the cult being persecuted in a manner that echoes the prior persecution of the cult's ancestors, and her transformation into a Mindless Titan (Isayama, Meeting 8-13). Ymir the Second thus allows for the repetition of the Eldians' cyclic destiny of persecution and eventual transformation into Mindless Titans. Like her namesakes, she is even used upon her defeat as a way to build the world that comes after her: the Marley parade her through the streets as a lesson to those Eldians who think to defy them, allowing her to be stoned in the process. However, unlike her namesakes, Ymir's cyclic fate does not end upon her defeat: in her Mindless Titan form, she eats a shifter and becomes human again, effectively giving her a second chance at life.

This second chance at life is where Isayama manipulates Ymir's fate, showing how she attempts to break the cyclic destiny tied to her name. Rather than having her play the role of a goddess-like figure as both she and her namesake had done so in the past, Isayama now has Ymir the Second escaping into the world behind the walls, hiding her newfound abilities as a Titan Shifter and blending in with the rest of the humans. In a complete reversal of her acceptance of

her role from before, Ymir now “lived the way [she] wanted” (Isayama, Meeting 15). Here, Ymir voices her defiance of her presupposed destiny. She will no longer simply accept her role, but rather, she will live by her own rules. However, for Isayama, even this voiced defiance of the role her name places on her is not enough to fully break her destiny. This is made most clear in the panel depicting her death, reproduced below:

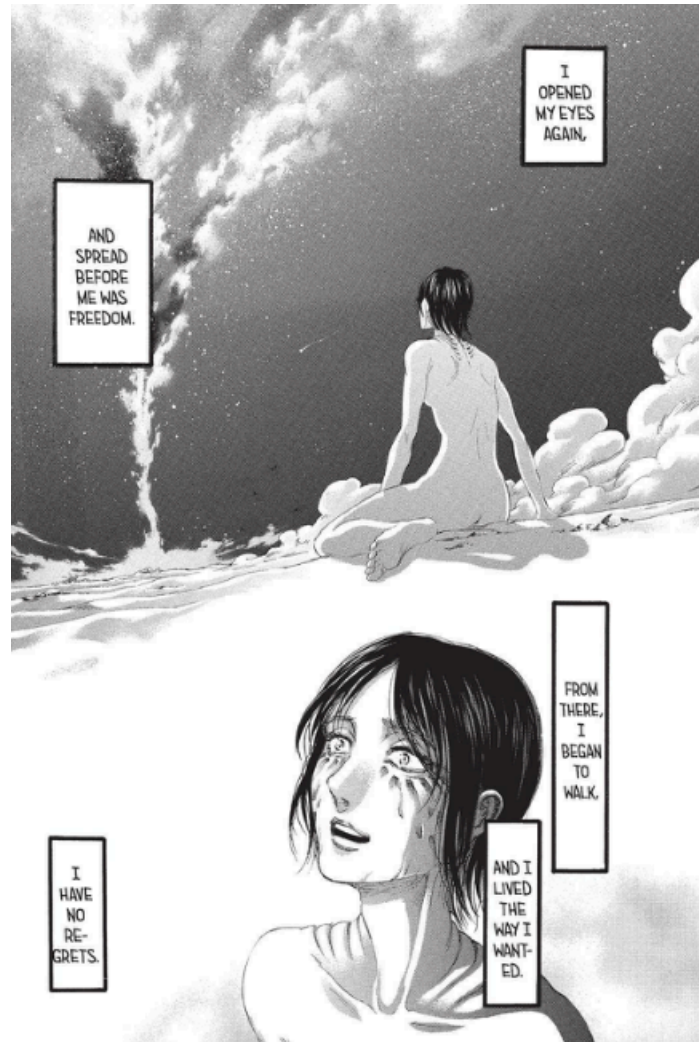


*Figure 4. Ymir turns herself in to the Marley and gives back the Titan Shifter abilities she “stole” by being consumed by a soldier named Porco. (Isayama, Midnight Train 26)*

In these panels, Ymir is clearly being forced into the role of a captive and sacrifice. This is reminiscent of her frost giant namesake, whose murder by Odin and his brothers marks “the creation of the cosmos from the body of a primordial sacrificial victim, who was sacrificed and dismembered...” (Bray 134). As mentioned prior, Titan Shifters can pass on their powers by being eaten by a fellow Eldian in Mindless Titan form. This can be viewed as a sacrifice of the original Titan Shifter in exchange for the birth of a new one. With her body bound and placed upon a platform that towers over the individual below her, Ymir the Second looks very much like a human sacrifice. Additionally, despite voicing her defiance of her cyclic destiny prior



reaching this point, Ymir is drawn here submitting to her fate. She is on her knees and hunched over, her eyes downcast. The dark circles drawn around Ymir's eyes indicate her exhaustion. She is also not showing her teeth, revealing her lack of aggression towards the Eldian soldier about to consume her. This entire pose paints a picture of absolute resignation. This is a direct opposite of her voicing her will to live the way she wishes:



*Figure 5. Ymir awakens from her 60-year-long “nightmare” as a Mindless Titan after consuming a Titan Shifter named Marcel. She declares here that she will live her life the way she wants, not for others. (Isayama, Meeting 16)*

In this panel, Ymir is sitting up tall and looking up at the sky, a pose that completely reverses the panel of her death. On her face is an expression of awe, and here she shows her

teeth, indicating a more aggressive stance towards walking her own path. In addition, she is neither bound nor clothed, granting her a degree of freedom to make her own choices, as opposed to the clothing and position of a bound human sacrifice that she later takes on. Above her head, Isayama draws what seems to be a trail of clouds that look two paths, indicating Ymir's ability to choose the path she walks. Of interest to note as well is the differences in positioning Ymir in the two panels. According to Daniel Casasanto, "Whereas right-handers tend to associate *right* with positive ideas and *left* with negative ideas, left-handers show the opposite pattern... Cultural conventions associating *good* with "right" and *bad* with "left" may reflect the implicit body-specific preferences of the right-handers, who greatly outnumber left-handers" (Casasanto 15). This means that having a character placed on the right of a panel will cause the presumably right-handed majority of the *Attack on Titan* reader population to associate the character with "good", whereas placing them on the left will depict the character as "evil." In Figure 5, she is placed towards the right side of the page, which is Isayama's way of indicating the positivity of her message. However, in Figure 4, she is clearly placed on the left side of the page, indicating the evil or negative nature of her resignation to her fate. The drawing on the right side of Figure 4 of the character who inherits her Titan Shifter abilities, Porco, indicates that he is also thinking of her in a negative light, viewing her as a "devil" and "a pathetic woman who'd been given a grand name" (Isayama, *Midnight Train* 26). Furthermore, Isayama indicates Ymir's eventual fate through both the trail of clouds and the direction she is facing in Figure 4: Ymir is turned to face the left side of the page, and the trail of clouds eventually converges on the left side of the panel. All of this indicates a negative fate, just like that of Ymir's namesakes. This is Isayama's way of showing that despite Ymir's vocal claim to defy the roles that others place on her, her lack of action towards fighting the role of a human sacrifice that she is given in

Figure 4 leads to her simply repeating the cycle of fate tied to her name. After all, “[o]ne can describe postures, actions, and conversation, but when all is ‘said and done,’ words are pale reflections of the literal ‘saying and doing.’” (Martin 344). Overall, the Ymir that is depicted in her death scene is one who looks broken, accepting her fate as a sacrifice to the Marley. This echoes her resignation to her prior role as a martyr and her namesakes’ roles as sacrifices. Therefore, through manipulating Ymir the Second’s fate and giving her a second chance at life, Isayama indicates that, in his opinion, simply voicing the intent to fight a cyclic destiny would not be enough to break it. Her placement on the left side of Figure 4, opposing her successor, shows that though she sacrifices herself in human form, the ones she sacrifices herself still believe her to be a monster. Without taking action to fight her fate, even when she is given a second chance at life, Ymir the Second simply ends up in the same position as her ancestor and the frost giant she parallels: a sacrifice for the creation of a new world that would only know her as wicked after her death. This is a tragic end for her character, thus establishing a cycle of tragedy that began with Ymir Fritz’s sacrifice and continues with that of Ymir the Second’s. Through their deaths, Isayama thus creates a cycle of tragedy that continues on with the many battles against the Titans and the Marleyans that cost the lives of thousands.

### **The Fires of Ragnarok**

As established prior, Ymir the frost giant’s death was required in order to build the world ruled by the Norse gods. What is very notable about the primordial frost giant’s death, however, is the violence that comes as a result of it. In Snorri Sturluson’s words:

‘The sons of Bor killed the giant Ymir,’ answered High. ‘When he fell, so much blood gushed from his wounds that with it they drowned all of the race of the frost giants... ‘From his blood they made the sea and the lakes. The earth was fashioned from the flesh,

and mountain cliffs from the bones...' (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 15-16).

Here, Sturluson establishes violent imagery relating to the death of Ymir. He begins first with the image of torrents of blood gushing from the primordial frost giant, so much that his own descendants, save for one household, drown in it. He then follows this image with one of the gods dismembering Ymir's body and using its pieces to build their world. In short, "Ymir's violent death sets the creation in motion, after which the universe is made from his body parts and inhabited by humans and other creatures" (Kaliff and Oestigaard 68). This passage indicates that Ymir's violent death was necessary to give birth to a new world. Ymir's gushing blood, in a strong parallel with the great flood stories in other mythologies around the world, wipes out the race of frost giants and makes room for the gods to rebirth the world in their image. This calls back to the idea of a world coming to an end with the violent death of a primordial being and being rebirthed after said being's death. It would be expected, then, that the violence of Ymir's death would eventually be echoed upon the end of the world of the Norse gods. This eventually comes to pass through Ragnarok, otherwise known as the "Twilight of the Gods":

'Thor will kill the Midgard Serpent... Because of the poison the serpent spits no him, he will fall to the earth, dead. The wolf will swallow Odin, and that will be his death. But immediately afterwards Vidar will stride forward... With one hand he takes hold of the wolf's upper jaw and rips apart its mouth...' (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 73).

Once again, Sturluson uses violent imagery to convey the death of one world and the beginning of a new one. In his version of Ragnarok, both the major gods Odin and Thor are violently poisoned and eaten. Odin's death in particular is of interest. When the old All-Father falls, his son, Vidar, steps in and violently kills the wolf, a role that he has prepared for through the ages. Considering that Vidar would live to see the end of Ragnarok and the birth of a new

world, this sequence of events can be considered an almost literal passing of the torch. In the Norse creation myth, Ymir's violent death signifies a passing of ownership of the world to Odin and his family. Odin and his family create a new world to their ideal and, after their violent deaths in Ragnarok, the ownership of the world thus passes on to the gods who survive Ragnarok, including the Vidar (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 77). Overall, Sturluson shows through his depiction of violence in both Ymir's and Odin's deaths Nordic destiny is strongly cyclical, involving the death of an old world and the resurrection of a new one in the midst of violence.

Isayama comments on the Norse notion of a cyclic destiny by presenting a cycle of violence in his own text. This can be most clearly seen through protagonist Eren Yeager, who, I argue, is one of the two characters who parallels Surt, the fire giant. The second character that parallels Surt is the Titan Shifter Bertolt Hoover, who is the first Titan, mindless or otherwise, that the reader ever meets. Surt's appears most prominently in Norse mythology during the creation of the world and the end of it. Per Sturluson's text:

‘... there was that world in the southern region which is called Muspell.... Surt [Black One] is the name of he who waits there at [Muspell's] edge... when the end of the world comes, he will set off to battle and defeat all the gods, burning the whole world with fire’ (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 13).

Surt does not play a prominent role in Norse mythology until Ragnarok, reproduced here from *The Poetic Edda*:

Surt comes from the south  
with a bright light in his hand,  
yes, the sun shines upon  
the sword in his grasp (Crawford 13).

In both of his appearances, Surt is associated with fire, destruction, and the south. He is destined to signal the first destructive blows of Ragnarok and the burning of the world. This set of traits creates an interesting parallel with Bertolt Hoover, who along with two other Titan

Shifters is sent by the Marleyans to retrieve the Titan Shifter powers that the royal Eldian family behind the walls still possess. Using his ability to shift into the Colossus Titan, Bertolt uses his immense size and strength to kick a hole into southern portion of the outermost walls, thus allowing an army of Mindless Titans to move past the first wall and eat the humans within. This serves as a “grim reminder” to the humans living behind the wall that though they have lived in peace for a century, the Titans are still a threat to them and can cause their complete annihilation. Some of the humans manage to escape, but a majority of those living behind the outermost wall are violently eaten (Kobayashi, *To You, 2000 Years in the Future*). This is an image that greatly echoes that of Odin being violently eaten during Ragnarok. Bertolt’s first attack on the wall ushers in the destruction of the humans behind it by not only letting in Mindless Titans, but also destroying the village behind the wall through flying debris. Overall, Isayama introduces the reader to his world by first staging his own version of Ragnarok: a giant from the south signals the fiery and violent destruction of a once peaceful old world, continuing a cycle of violence that had begun long ago. After doing this, his path of destruction ushers in the birth of a new world. In this case, the new world that Bertolt ushers in is one where Eren gains his own Titan Shifter abilities from his father and spearheads the human resistance against the Titans. The rebirthed world after Bertolt’s initial attack is one that soon faces its own Ragnarok, this time with Eren taken on the role of Surt.

In the same way that Ymir’s violent death is eventually echoed upon the gods, Eren’s and Eldia’s violent massacre is eventually inflicted upon the Marleyans. In the events leading up to this massacre, Bertolt is killed and his Colossus Titan powers are transferred to Armin, Eren’s best friend. With Female Titan Shifter Annie incapacitated and in the possession of the Eldians, Armored Titan Shifter Reiner is forced to return to Marley and atone for the failed mission. It is

while Reiner is in Marley that he and the rest of the Marleyans receive a grim reminder of their own, via Eren:

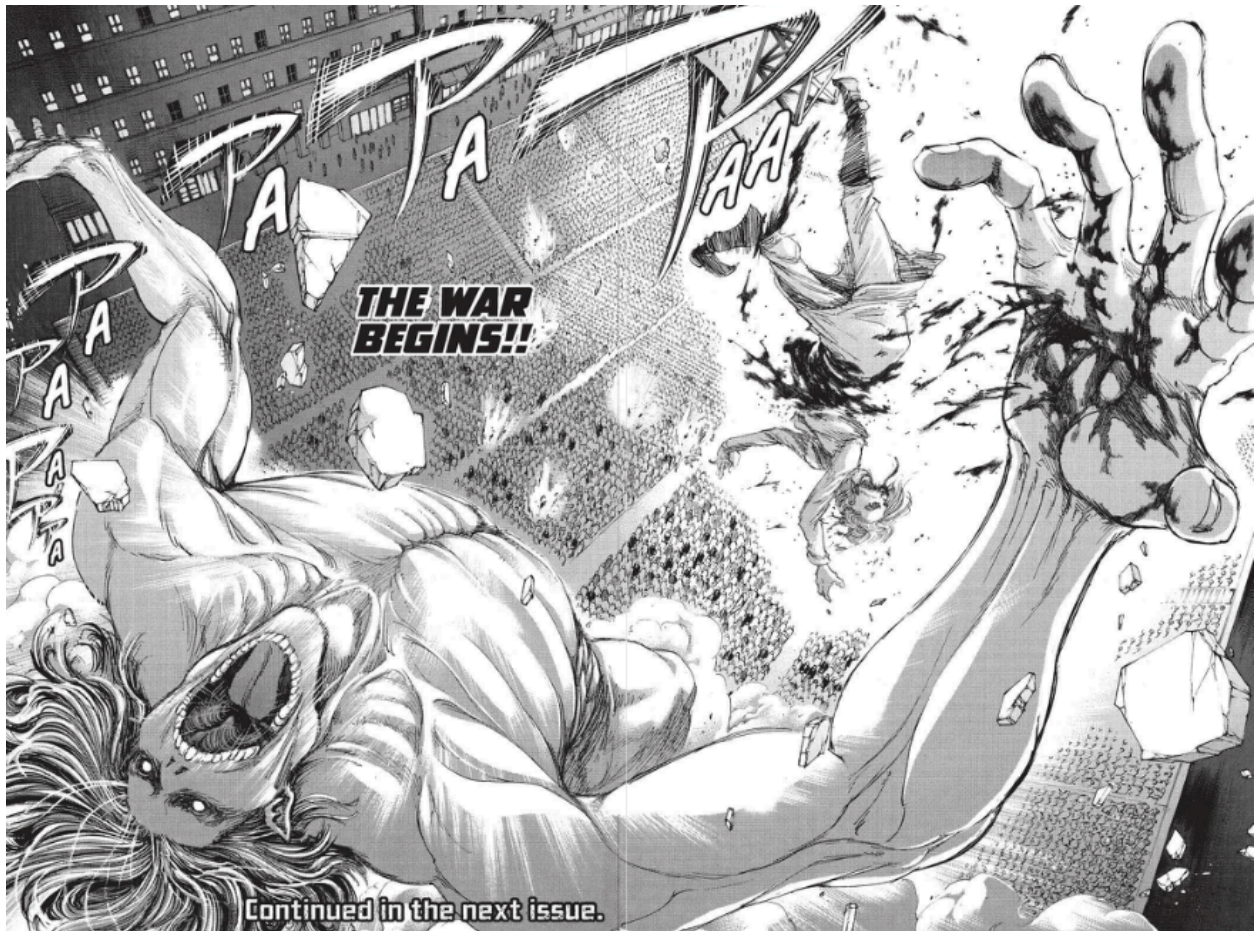


Figure 6. Eren, in Titan form, wreaks his violent revenge on the Marleyans during a gathering of major world leaders. (Isayama, *Declaration of War* 45-46)

This panel depicts a clearly violent declaration of war, signaling the start of *Attack on Titan*'s newest version of Ragnarok. Rather than Bertolt's (or Armin's) Colossus Titan signaling the first blow, it is Eren's Attack Titan carrying this out. The panel shows debris flying everywhere upon the crowd and a man being ripped in half, emphasizing the violence of this new grim reminder. The dynamic lines Isayama draws around Eren's form expand him, making him seem more monstrous. This is an ironic twist to the reader's already established notion of Eren being the hero, a notion that is further shaken by the fact that Isayama draws Eren's Titan form

on the left of the page, while the perceived leader of the “villainous” Marley is drawn being killed on the right. In this panel, Eren’s hair is also fanned out behind him, as though made of flames, once again heightening his parallels in this moment to the fire giant Surt. Most telling of all, however, are the words “The war begins”, showing the reader that Eren’s attack is the first blow of an oncoming violent war of Marley versus Eldia. This reflects the way Bertolt’s first attack was the first blow of humans making progress against the Mindless Titans. Isayama thus shows through Eren, a boy from the southernmost part of the walls, and Bertolt, a Titan Shifter who arrives at the walls from the south, that Surt is indeed present in the world of *Attack on Titan* and where he goes, Ragnarok follows. In particular, he shows in these panels that though Eren has been the hero in the readers’ eyes for 100 chapters up to this point, the cycle of violence he is perpetuating changes him into a monster. The cycle of violence is thus portrayed in a strongly negative light and is shown to be able to transform even the hero of the story into a terrible monster.

This now brings us to how the cycle of violence is tied into the notion of a cyclic destiny. For the Norse people, violence was a strong part of their way of life. For them, “... clan women often instigate the men to retributive violence... violence, then, was generally encouraged among the Norse men, because it was believed that men berserk with murderous rage would make the most feared and best warriors” (Glassman). With Norse women often prompting their men to seek violent retribution, it is clear that this is part of the cyclic nature of violence. When one person performs a slight against another, it can thus be expected that they will have retribution rained upon them. In turn, those who brought the retribution upon that person may expect retribution upon them in kind. Therefore, this pattern of inflicting violent retribution against one party and expecting violent retribution from that same party leads to a never-ending cycle.



Violence thus becomes integrated into Norse society, so much so that Norse men are actively encouraged to partake in violence.

With the notion of violence and being a warrior so integrated into their society, it would therefore be important that a Norse man becomes a fearsome berserker, else he may be viewed as less than a man. Ralph Metzner further connects the notion of violence and destiny in his article, *Germanic mythology and the fate of Europe*, stating that the Viking warriors “believed that if they were slain in battle they would be taken by the Valkyrie, [Odin’s] battle-maidens, to Valhalla, there to spend the time in ceaseless sportive fighting and feasting, until the end of the world when they would fight beside [Odin] and the gods against the demons and monsters bringing about the ragnarok. If they did not die in battle, and instead succumbed to illness or accidental injury, their fate was the much less glorious one of going to the frozen Underworld called Hell” (Metzner). It is clear from Metzner’s statement that a warrior who gains entrance to Valhalla is an honored one. To enter this honored Valhalla, according to Metzner, is to avoid the frozen Hell. It would require being a great warrior and submitting to one’s fate as a warrior. As Metzner states above, those who succumb to illness or accidental injury would end up in the non-ideal place of Hell, thus trapping Norse warriors into their fates. They must ensure that they are destined to die in battle, so that they avoid the frozen halls of Hell. Odin, who wants to have only the best warriors defending him from the Fenriswolf, will presumably choose only those warriors with the strength and valor needed to attempt to defend him from his destiny. Therefore, the warriors who savagely fight on in spite of their destiny to one day die are the ones who are most valued in the Viking culture. It is a great honor to be recognized as a great warrior in life, and an even greater one to fight with the gods in death and bring about the eventual rebirth of a new

world. In summary, violence begets violence in the Norse world, and it is encouraged so that Norse warriors may earn their place alongside the warrior gods.

However, Isayama believes differently. As examined before through Ymir, Isayama believes that merely voicing an intention to end the cycle of destiny is not enough to escape it. However, through Eren's actions, he also shows that singular concentration on fighting and perpetuating violence does nothing to help one escape their cyclic destiny and does not bring one honor and glory. This idea can most clearly be seen when Eren and his companions reach the ocean at last, a goal that they have been working towards since the first chapter of the manga:



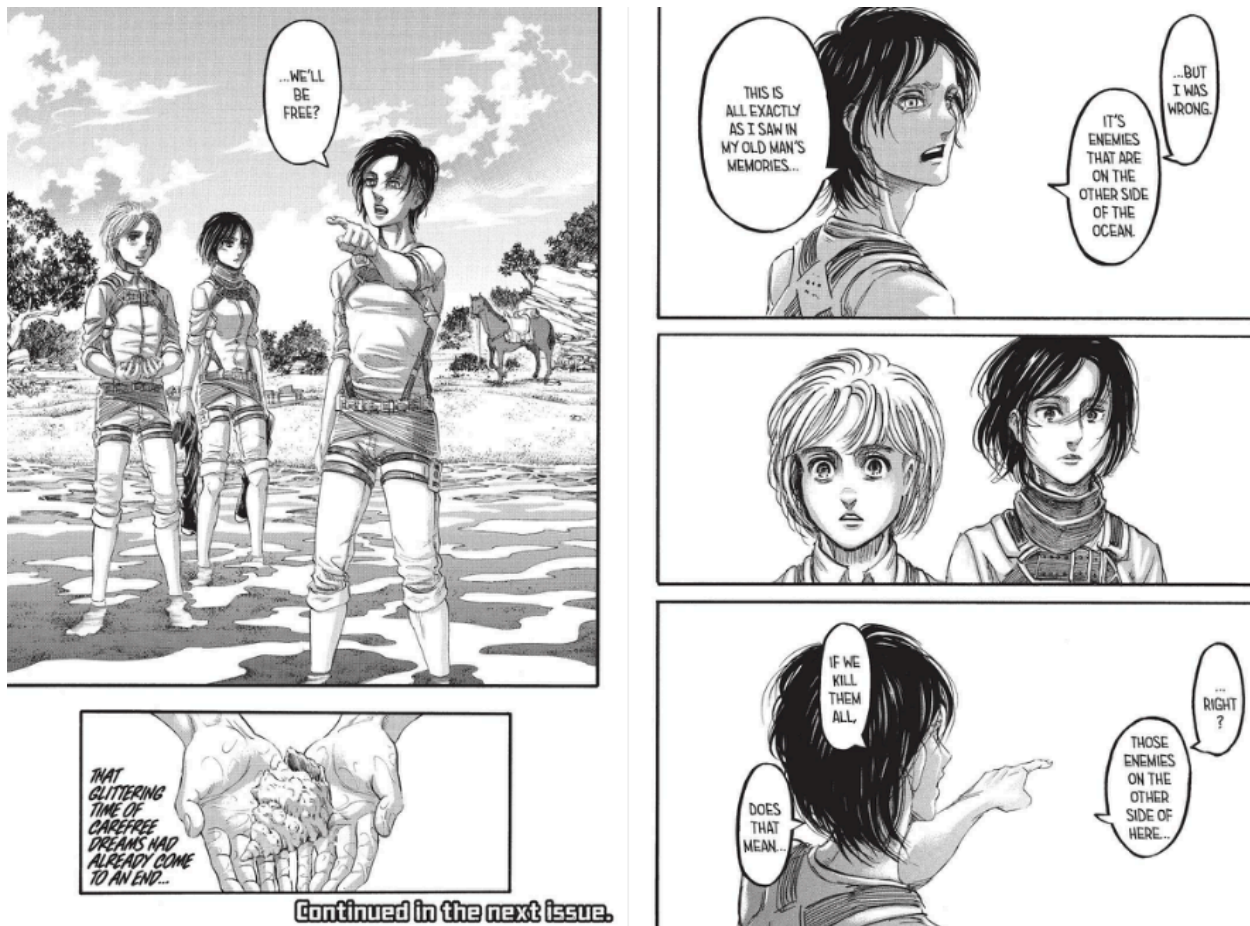


Figure 7. Protagonist Eren Yeager and his allies finally reach the ocean. While his friends and allies revel in achieving this goal, Eren stares across the ocean towards the Marley. (Isayama, *To the Other Side of the Wall* 41-46)

In the first two pages, a reader can clearly see the joy and excitement the various characters are exuding when they reach the ocean. Their reactions are varied, from fear to elation to fascination, but Eren's reaction stands apart from all of them. Rather than joining his longtime companions in fully embracing and exploring the ocean, Eren wades furthest into the water and stares out beyond the horizon, towards Marley. When Armin asks him about his reaction to the ocean, Eren only gives him distracted answers and points at the horizon. By doing this, he is pointing towards that the people he considers his enemies are on the other side of the ocean. In these panels, Isayama draws Eren as standing apart from his two closest friends, as though his single-mindedness towards destroying the Marley is causing him to drift away from them. This

separation is further emphasized by how Isayama uses the dimensions of the panel to separate the three friends. In every panel and page that Eren shares with Mikasa and Armin, they are standing on separate halves of the panel or page. Additionally, if the reader views the scene by facing Eren's back, he would be on the left side each time, indicating negative intention.

Another interesting detail to note is the lack of motion lines in the panels concerning Eren, Armin, and Mikasa. In the words of Neil Cohn, motion lines "show a path moving from one state to another... Japanese manga push [motion lines] even further, with paths being represented by a whole mass of lines" (Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. 39). From the distinct lack of lines in these panels, it is clear that Isayama has deliberately left them out. He thus makes his characters static. This shows how though Armin and Mikasa wish to share this moment with Eren, neither of them can approach him. Eren, in turn, makes no movement to turn to fully face them or move towards them, as he is too busy staring beyond the ocean's horizon. Additionally, every other character's face is drawn to be light and open, but Eren's is covered by the slight shadows created by his hair. In comparison to the other characters, his face looks darker and more cramped, once again capturing his lack of movement. By not including any dynamic lines, Isayama freezes Eren in his spot, portraying how both his body and mind are trapped in his cyclic destiny. Eren is fighting so hard to end the suffering of his people that he locks himself into the cycle of violence. He is unable to take in the joy the others feel at the end of their land's suffering at the hands of the Titans. By being drawn on the left side and having a face that is darkened more than the rest of the characters, Eren is also being portrayed as a less than righteous character. By drawing his protagonist in this way, Isayama is telling the reader that there is neither honor nor glory in perpetuating the cycle of violence. Rather than joining his companions in celebrating bringing

peace to the land, Eren is already looking towards the site of his next battle and the time when he can finally usher in a Ragnarok of his own upon the Marleyan people. In these panels, as indicated from the position and style that Isayama draws his protagonist in, Eren is just as villainous as the Titans Shifters from before. He is now absolutely locked into the cycle of violence and, in Isayama's opinion, is also locked in his destiny to continue fighting and bringing with him violent retribution. Eren cannot change his destiny and break the cycle of violence, because he is too single-mindedly concentrated on moving forward with his violent retribution towards the Marleyans.

We can draw a further connection between Eren's lack of appreciation for the ocean and the giants' lack of appreciation for the bifrost bridge. In *The Prose Edda*, Sturluson describes the bifrost as a rainbow bridge that connects the earth to the sky. He notes its beauty and strength in particular, and the fact that it will break once Ragnarok arrives and Surtr's army rides across it (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 21). *The Poetic Edda* also mentions the bifrost bridge in *Grimnismal*, stating that it burns red hot every day (Crawford 67). It seems that one purpose of the bifrost burning so strongly is to keep invaders out of Asgard. When Surtr, the fire giant, and his army ride across, they would presumably be immune to the heat of the bridge due to Muspellheim's hot environment. Once the bridge breaks under their feet, the frost giants will be able to invade Asgard by sea and by crossing the now cool bridge. In many ways, one could argue that ocean acts as Isayama's bifrost. It connects the worlds of the walls with the land of Marley, at first serving as a barrier that prevents Eren and his comrades from crossing into Marley territory. However, once the Eldians from the wall manage to develop the technology needed to cross the ocean, they bring doom upon Marley. The image of Eren looking forward, past the bifrost towards the home of his enemies, echoes that of Surtr; he does not take the time to appreciate the

beauty of the ocean. He is only looking forward towards the day when he can strike the first blow against his enemies.

When examining how Eren perpetuates the cycle of violence, it is important to also examine him as presented by Isayama in his youth, before finding out that the enemies he seeks are located across the sea. When he was a boy, Eren and his father visited the home of Mikasa, who would eventually become his constant companion and one of his greatest friends. When they arrive at her home, they find Mikasa and her family missing. While his father is away, Eren continues investigating the house, where he eventually finds Mikasa about to be trafficked and – after being caught by one of her kidnappers - urges her to fight:





*Figure 8. Eren urges Mikasa to fight so they can survive, spurring her into committing her first act of violence (Hiroshi).*

In these shots, a viewer can clearly see that Eren is making changes in his world. In this case, he “awakens” Mikasa’s innate abilities as a fighter and helps her save both their lives. In many ways, this can be seen as a hero’s task, as he manages to boost a young girl’s confidence and spur her into saving both his life and her own. However, when examined through the lens on perpetuating violence, this scene takes on a much less heroic light. It is very true that Eren performs a service to Isayama’s world by giving confidence to one of the best fighters of his generation and saving her life in the process, but by doing so, he also continues the cycle of violence. He first kills two of her traffickers, then spurs her into killing the third. He puts blood on both of their hands and instills the absolute need to fight in the both of them. However, Mikasa still knows when to set aside the singular focus on fighting to relax at the beach and celebrate when humanity wins. She uses Eren’s words as not a mantra, but an inspiration, as seen when Isayama repeats the words “If we don’t fight, we can’t win” while she and her allies are battling the Armored Titan (Isayama, Hero 7). The reader first reads that phrase in 2010, when Chapter 6 of the manga was first released in Japan. The fact that Isayama repeats that phrase 6 years later in Chapter 82 shows that those words both had a huge impact on Mikasa and remain relevant to him still. Those words are an inspiration to Mikasa, as Eren has instilled in her the need to fight against whatever fate might attempt to hand her. Eren, however, seems to use those words as a mantra, as seen in the previous figure. He now locks himself into wanting to win and to fight so much that he perpetuates victory at the cost of violence. In many ways, Eren grows up to become a monster, twisting the meaning of “if we don’t fight, we can’t win” into a grotesque shadow of the inspirational words they once were.

How, then, would one of Isayama's characters break their cyclic destiny if two of the most important and power characters, Eren and Ymir, are unable to? The answer to this question can be found through how Isayama draws the history of the Eldian people. In the same chapter as the Marleyan version of Titan history, Isayama also chooses to present the Eldian version of that same history:



*Figure 9. A young Grisha Yeager speaking to a group of fellow Eldian rebels. They have acquired a set of forbidden books from their benefactor and are plotting an uprising against the Marleyans. (Isayama, That Day 28)*

Once again, Isayama toys with the way he draws his Titans, though he now differentiates these Titans greatly from those he drew only a few pages before to supplement the Marleyan version of Eldian history. In these panels, the Titans are drawn as upright creatures, with proportional limbs and faces. Furthermore, though they still dwarf the humans next to them, they are drawn in poses that mirror the humans'. These details combined with the nakedness of both the humans and the Titans thus emphasize the Titans' similarities to humanity, rather than their differences as portrayed earlier in the panels on Marleyan history. The most striking detail of all,



however, comes from the panel furthest on the right. The humans viewing the Eldian history are drawn as though the reader is looking up at them. The lines framing the panel create the illusion of elongating the humans, causing them to look much larger than they truly are. This comes in direct contrast with the lines framing the other two panels on which the drawing of the Titans is housed, with the lines pointing down and giving the impression that the drawing of the Titans is much smaller than it really is. Says Cohn, “A more dramatic case of focal lines... can radiate from the edges of the panels towards the object of interest... These ‘zoom lines’ dramatically draw attention to a particular object with a sense of ‘rushing in’” (Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. 40). Using these zoom lines, Isayama emphasizes how much smaller the historical images are in comparison to the humans, requiring the eye to zoom in on the images in order to see them clearly, whereas for the humans, the eye must zoom out. In effect, Isayama grows the humans into giants while shrinking the Titans. The angle at which the humans are being viewed also lends to this illusion, elongating the humans’ faces and limbs in ways that are very similar to how the Titans are drawn when they are portrayed in Marleyan history. In these panels, the humans become more Titan-like and the Titans become more human-like, a deliberate choice that Isayama makes in order to show that the humans of his world are much more similar to the Titans than the mythological humans and gods are to the frost giants. This hints at a component of balancing the monster and the human for Isayama’s idea of breaking the cyclic fate. Such a notion is especially poignant when one considers that in the case of both Eren Yeager and Ymir the Second, they fulfill the roles of their cyclic destiny as monsters. Eren transforms into a monstrous Titan to rain destruction upon his enemies, and Ymir sacrifices herself in her human form, yet is still thought of as a monster.

## The One-Armed Victor

For Isayama, the most influential people of his world are, like Eren, those who choose to fight. However, these influential humans are also those who realize that it is through their human ability to make their own choices they can usher in change. In particular, Isayama speaks to the notion that his most influential humans are those who are able to balance their humanity with their monstrosity. He shows through the character Commander Erwin Smith that knowing when to shift the balance between human and monster towards one side or the other is what allows an individual to break their cyclic fate. This is elaborated through the character Armin Arlert during the capture of the Titan Shifter known as the Female Titan:

If there's anyone who can bring change, it will be someone willing to sacrifice what they care for. It will be someone who can throw aside their humanity, in order to defeat monsters. Someone who can't sacrifice anything can't ever change anything! (Kobayashi, Erwin Smith - 57th Expedition Beyond the Walls (4)).

It is clear in this scenes that Armin, speaking for Isayama, values those who are capable of making great sacrifices in order to bring about change. Like Eren, they can sacrifice their own humanity and embrace the monsters within them to see that these changes happen. However, unlike Eren, the people that Armin describes are all able to analyze a situation and quickly decide if they must sacrifice their humanity in that moment in order to achieve success. They know how to control the balance between human and monster to bring these changes. Eren, as seen in Figure 6, does not exert such control over the balance. He lets go of his humanity so much that he becomes a monster, even when faced with a large amount of civilians. Erwin's ability to let go of his humanity and pick it back up when he needs to can most clearly be seen during his final mission, where the group is being attacked by an army of Titans. Erwin's first reaction to this attack is reproduced below:



Figure 10. Commander Erwin Smith experiences the guilt of leading his comrades to their deaths before being comforted by Captain Levi Ackerman and convinced to abandon his humanity once again. He must sacrifice a hundred more soldiers and his own life to give Eren and the rest a chance at victory. (Isayama, *The Unknown Soldiers* 25-28)

In these panels, the reader can clearly see Erwin's human side as he expresses his guilt over his many lost comrades. They are standing around him in a circle, showing the strong weight they hold over him. He is looking down at the ground, with his shoulders hunched over. The large amount of detail in the faces of the soldiers surrounding Erwin also indicate that he rather vividly remembers each and every one of them. Using this technique, Isayama is increasing the visible weight on Erwin's shoulders by increasing the amount of detail the reader has to take in and digest. The reader is sharing Erwin's vivid memory of the soldiers he has lost, and because of that, they are also feeling his guilt. Most telling, however, is the shadow over Erwin's eyes, as these "shadows or shading can occur on the whole face, over the eyes, around the eyes, or under the eyes to show a sense of doom, surprise, or anxiety. This shading has nothing to do with actual light sources, but rather with a character's emotional state" (Cohn and Ehly 22). It is clear throughout the first three pages that Erwin is indeed experiencing a sense of doom or anxiety. He has spent his whole life chasing the dream of proving his father's theories correct, but is now forced to choose between setting his dreams aside for victory or selfishly preserving himself. Over the course of this lifelong chase, he has sacrificed the lives of hundreds of his comrades, putting aside his own humanity in order to make change happens. The sense of doom and anxiety he feels over his lost dreams and the comrades he sacrificed shows his humanity. It proves that though Erwin is capable of setting aside his humanity for the sake of defeating the Titans, he will always pick it back up when the battle is done.

Isayama furthers the idea of Erwin's humanity being balanced with his natural monster through the framing of the scene in which Erwin chooses to set aside his humanity one last time. In the last two pages of figure above, he begins first with a wide shot to establish the context of the scene: Levi, Erwin, and their small party are being attacked by Titans, with the Beast Titan

Shifter hurtling rocks at them and smashing through their defenses. The background of this panel is highly detailed, just like the two pages before, lending a sense of chaos and heaviness to the panel. Isayama then transitions to close-up shots of both Erwin and Levi as Erwin laments over his broken dreams and Levi listens. In comparison to the wide-shot panel, these close-up shot panels isolate the characters from the background and allow the reader to focus on the strong emotions shown on each character's face. Effectively, Isayama points to an extremely human component to this destructive scene, as he shows that it is not merely faceless soldiers being attacked currently, but characters that the reader has known and grown close to over the course of the manga. This is, again, a balance between the destructive monster and the pondering human that is simultaneously in conflict and in agreement within Erwin. As we move away from a close-up shot of Erwin's and Levi's faces and move back a little bit to a medium shot of Erwin sitting on the box, the reader is once again given a background. The environment around the two is once again heavy, but not as chaotic as before. This allows the reader to see Erwin's and Levi's pose as Levi finally "make[s] the choice" for Erwin. When this happens, we are once again given close-up shots of the characters and see the full range of their expressions. In these panels, the shadow over Erwin's face disappears, as does the highly detailed background of the pages before. Against this plain white background, Erwin lifts his eyes and the shadow vanishes from his face, indicating that he has cleared his mind and accepted both his death and the death of his dream. He truly will lead the recruits to hell, sacrificing both them and himself for the sake of humanity's victory. He has decided one last time to put aside his humanity in order to defeat the Titans.

One might ask which Norse figure Isayama chooses to make Erwin Smith a parallel of. This Norse figure is the War God, Tyr, who is best known for his dealings with the Fenriswolf.

In the *Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson describes the binding of the Fenriswolf, in which the monster refuses to be bound by the gods unless one of the gods offers up his hand as a pledge to indicate that the wolf can easily break the fetter they've made:

No one was willing to hold out his hand until Tyr raised his right hand and laid it in the wolf's mouth. But when the wolf strained against the fetter, the band only hardened... They all laughed, except Tyr; he lost his hand (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 41).

In this brief passage, a reader can see that Tyr is one of the bravest of the gods. When none of the other gods were willing to offer up their hand as a pledge to uphold the false promise they made with the Fenriswolf, Tyr steps forward and offers up his right hand. When the Fenriswolf found that he was unable to break the fetter that the gods claimed he could, Tyr is the one that takes the brunt of the punishment for such deception. All of this points to the idea that though Tyr is the God of War, his primary role in Sturluson's mythology is one that aligns more closely with the notions of justice and keeping oaths. He was punished with the loss of his hand for essentially lying to the wolf alongside his fellow gods. In effect, "loss of a hand for perjury is a symbolic punishment: when taking an oath, one must raise one's fingers" (Reichert 389). From this moment onward, Tyr is symbolically unable take any oaths. He will also be crippled compared to the warrior he once was, as the loss of his right hand would also mean the loss of his fighting hand. However, Sturluson notes that he is often invoked by "men of action" and that they "do not think of him as a peace maker" (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 36). This shows that, despite the loss of his hand, Tyr is still viewed as the God of War and can be invoked in times of strife. Tyr essentially keeps all of the respect and honor due to him as God of War and, when Ragnarok comes, he will be designated the honor of killing and being killed by the terrible hound, Garmr.



The loss of Tyr's hand is reflected in Commander Erwin. While riding to save the gagged and bound Eren from the clutches of the Armored Titan, Erwin is caught off-guard by a Titan and has his right arm bitten off. Despite this, he orders his subordinates to continue riding to save Eren, with his soldiers accepting his death until he surprises everyone by appearing on top of the Armored Titan, sans his right arm, and cutting Eren free (Seko). From this moment onward, Erwin is only able to perform the *Attack on Titan* soldiers' salute – placing his right fist over his heart - with his left hand, indicating that he is no longer able to correctly take his soldier's oath. This detail becomes especially significant when one considers what the loss of Erwin's arm is a symbolic punishment for:

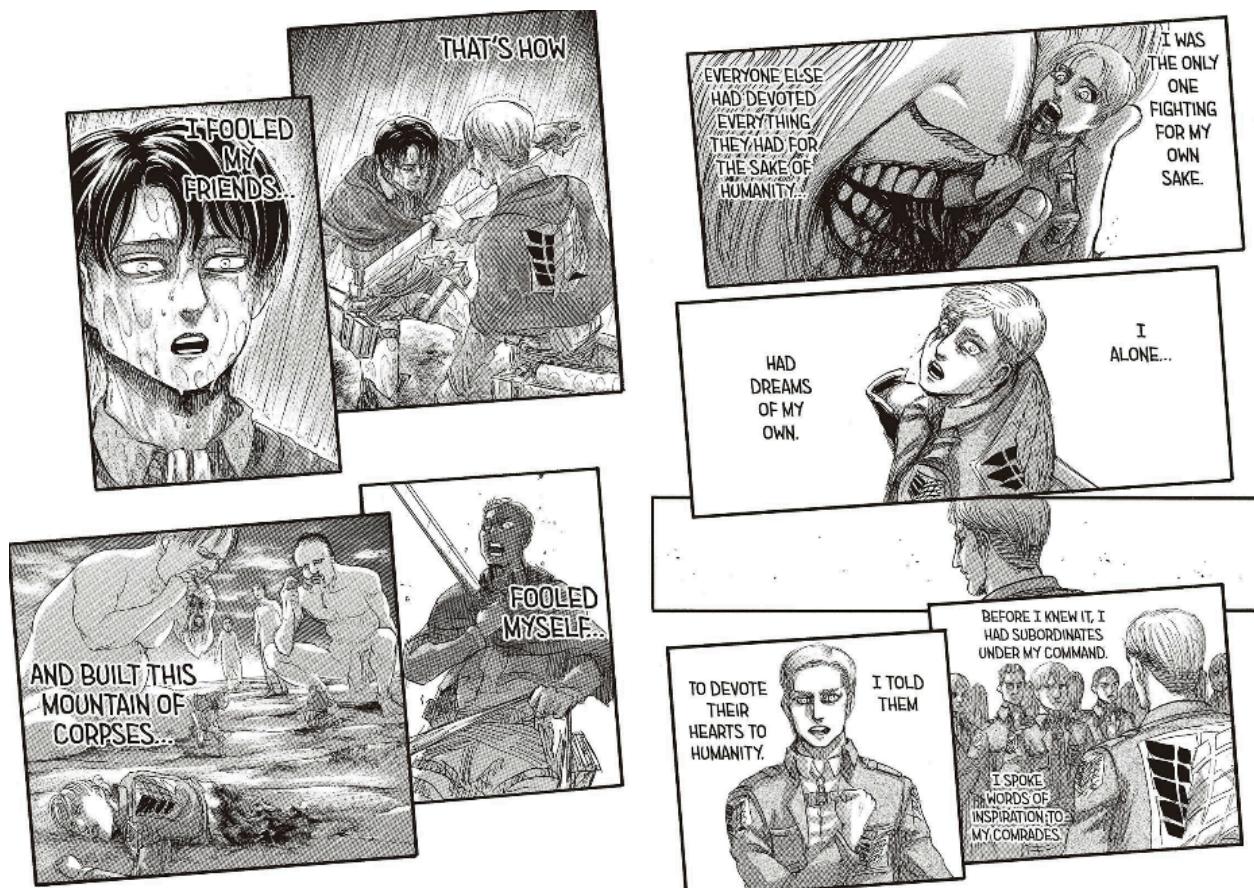


Figure 11. Erwin monologues about the lies he fed to his comrades for the sake of fulfilling his dream to reach Eren's basement and prove his father's theories correct. (Isayama, *The Thunder Spear* 9-10)

The loss of Erwin's arm is a punishment for the lies that Erwin tells others in order to inspire them and help him achieve his goals. Erwin lies to his subordinates, his friends, and even himself, managing to convince all around him that he and everyone else fights for the sake of humanity's progress. However, he continues to hold the selfish dream of finding out the truth of the world he lives in close, and as a result, he sacrifices hundreds of lives and eventually, his right arm. This is a reflection of the loss of Tyr's right arm as a result of the gods lying to the Fenriswolf when promising it that the magical fetter they've made specifically to trap him will break, just like all of the other fetters. In a way, Tyr also ensures progress by going along with the gods' plan to lie to the Fenriswolf and losing his right arm in the process, thus crippling him in time for Ragnarok.

Erwin's fragmented thought process is reflected in the panels above. Each panel is drawn at an oblique angle, a visual technique that causes "the subject itself... to be tilted on a diagonal" (Giannetti 526). Many of the panels also overlap each other. All of these different framing techniques indicate that Erwin's thoughts about his lies and dreams are extremely distressing and crooked. He is unable to perfectly align his need to lie and manipulate his subordinates to do what he wants with his own dreams of finding out the truth behind his father's theories. Erwin thinks of himself as a figure that grows darker and, in his view, becomes more monstrous with each lie he tells. He seems to be destined for a violent end, in a similar manner to Tyr, as punishment for all of the lies he has told. In summary, one would expect Erwin, who has thus far sent so many soldiers to their deaths, to die violently and continue the cycle of violence that Eren perpetuates in Figure 6.

However, it is in comparing Erwin to Tyr that Isayama shows that the Commander has indeed broken free of his cyclic destiny. Rather than dying the violent end that many expect him



to die, Erwin is instead given a relatively peaceful death. After leading the diversionary charge against the Beast Titan and having his organs damaged from flying rocks, Erwin's unconscious body is brought before Captain Levi alongside a badly burnt and dying Armin. Levi is holding a special serum that would transform one of them into a Titan, saving his life by allowing him to eat their captured Colossus Titan Shifter. Despite Levi's initial insistence on saving Erwin and Squad Leader Hange Zöe's and Cadet Floch's arguments about needing Erwin's experience and excellent tactical mind, the Captain eventually relents and chooses to save Armin instead. When asked why, he states:

Can't we just let him go? His only choice was to become the devil and it was us who wanted that of him. Not only that he was finally freed from hell but we were going to call him right back into it... So I think we ought to let him rest. (Isayama, *Midnight Sun* 42-44)

Levi makes it clear here that the reason why he does not bring Erwin back is to give the Commander the rest he deserves. This calls back to the fact that Erwin's last conscious act as Commander was to spearhead the charge against the Beast Titan, a diversionary tactic so that Levi could attempt to kill the Beast Titan and stop his rock throwing attacks. Essentially, he is marching for humanity's progress until the very end, fighting despite the fact that he has accepted that he will die that day. This seems to be a reflection of the values of the Viking Age hero, who marches onward towards "his fated death, which is usually violent and dramatic" (Steinsland 229). Erwin indeed experiences a dramatic death, using his last conscious decision as Commander to give humanity a chance at progressing against the Titan menace. However, this blaze of glory is balanced against Erwin's last few breaths, which are taken not on the battlefield, but on a rooftop, surrounded by his closest comrades. He therefore defies Steinsland's observation about the typical deaths of Nordic heroes and dies dramatically, but not violently. Levi also refuses to transform Erwin into a Titan. He allows Erwin one last blaze of glory as a

monster before allowing him to die peacefully as a human. Even up until his death, Erwin maintains full control of the balance between his human side and his monstrous side. Isayama thus has Erwin escape the cycle of violence that he has lived in for so long and avoids dying violently during *Attack on Titan*'s version of Ragnarok. In this way, Erwin is given an end that is much less violent than, but also just as glorious as that of his Norse god parallel.

Aside from using Erwin as the parallel of the Norse God of War, Isayama also presents him as a foil to Eren, who does not show nearly as much control over the balance between his human nature and his monstrous one. While Erwin was often ready to throw away his humanity and sacrifice hundreds of lives, he usually ensured that the only lives being sacrificed were those of his soldiers or of corrupt nobles, such as when he allowed the Female Titan Shifter to run through the streets of the innermost walled city. (Kobayashi, *Mercy: Assault on Stohess*, Part 2). Eren, on the other hand, does not show such restraint when attacking the Marleyans:



*Figure 12. Eren and Mikasa look upon the devastation of Eren's attack on Marley. (Isayama, Too Little, Too Late 9-11)*

In these panels, Isayama draws the devastating aftermath of Figure 6, in which Eren's monstrous transformation kills not only many Marleyan soldiers, but also many more Marleyan citizens. The smoke and devastation surrounding Eren further adds to the notion that Eren is a parallel of the fire giant Surt, whose arrival heralds the coming of Ragnarok. In the face of this destruction, Mikasa is clearly drawn to be devastated. She looks upon it with grief drawn all over her face and even weeps when she kneels down and looks at Eren. In comparison, Eren seems to have no reaction when he looks upon the dead civilians. He doesn't say anything when Mikasa speaks to him. Instead, he only looks forward, already formulating the next step of his attack. Most prominent are the markings beneath Eren's eyes. Isayama has long used those markings to indicate when a Titan Shifter has recently transformed. They are what separates those whose physical bodies can be both human and monster from those who are limited to a human form. Essentially, the markings around a Titan Shifter's eyes mark the people who were recently monsters. The fact that Isayama includes the eye markings in these panels shows how Eren has given up his humanity and tipped the balance within him towards the monster. Eren has indeed sacrificed his own humanity to defeat his enemies, but in doing so, he has transformed into a much greater monster than Erwin ever became. He does not exercise control over the balance between his humanity and his monstrosity. Rather, he completely tosses away all of his humanity and becomes a monster in an attempt to make the same changes to his destiny that Commander Erwin was able to make. As a result of this lack of balance, he is unable to change anything and thus continues to perpetuate Isayama's cycle of violence. Therefore, Isayama shows through the parallel of Erwin with Tyr and the foil relationship of Erwin and Eren that it takes the balancing of a person's humanity and monstrosity in order to break a cyclical destiny.

## The One-Eyed Sage

Standing opposed to the frost giants are the gods, and foremost among them is Odin, the All-Father. As Ruler of the Gods, it would be expected that Odin is the sky father of Norse mythology, in the same vein as Zeus and Jupiter. However, there is also evidence that the original sky father was not Odin, but Tyr, the Norse God of War. This is because “in Germanic, the word for ‘god’ survives as the name of the god Tyr, a Germanic war god, e.g. [Old English] *Tīw* and [New English] Tuesday, a specific deity whose name is built on the same word was *\*dyeus phater* ‘sky father’” (Mallory and Adams 409). Based on the origin of his name, it can be theorized that Tyr was indeed the original ‘sky father’. If Odin was truly the original sky father, then his name should be built upon the word for ‘sky father’ instead, not Tyr. This means that at some point within the history of Norse mythology, Odin replaces Tyr as the foremost of all the gods. This causes Tyr to fade into the background of mythology when compared to Odin. This creates an interesting parallel with *Attack on Titan* when one considers that Squad Leader Hange Zoë, who stands as Odin’s parallel in Isayama’s world, eventually takes over the command of the Survey Corps. upon the death of Erwin, Tyr’s parallel. This, along with Hange eventually gaining the primary traits of Odin, is Isayama’s way of indicating that it is Hange, not Erwin, that serves as the supposed All-Father of his Norse pantheon. By doing this, Isayama also creates yet a parallel between his story and Norse mythology: that of the historical cycle, with the focus of the pantheon moving from the “sky father” Tyr to the “third god” Odin.

Odin’s primary traits in Norse mythology are mostly found in his many names, of which there are well over 200 hundred. A list of these names can be found in Sturluson’s *The Uppsala*

*Edda*, with some among them being “One-eyed dweller in Frigg’s embrace” (126), “All-Father”, “Wise One”, “Thruster”, “Very Wise One” (37), and “Victory-god of the fiery spear” (127). The names paint a picture of Odin as a wise god with only one eye, who wields a spear in battle and is chief among the gods. Most significant, however, is the name “Hangi”, translated from Old Norse to mean “Hanged One” (181). That name forms the possible root of the name “Hange”, hinting that the character Hange acts in Isayama’s world as the stand-in for Odin. And indeed, she does: within the pages of *The Poetic Edda*, the reader finds a tale describing Odin sacrificing one of his eyes for a drink at the Well of Mimir so that he may gain sacred wisdom (Crawford 8). Isayama’s Hange displays a very similar sacrifice during the chapter titled *Midnight Sun*, in which she remembers what happened to her and her research assistant, Moblit, after the Colossus Titan attacked them:





*Figure 13. Hange Zöe's friend and Titan assistant, Moblit, pushes her down a well to save her from a Titan's attack, sacrificing himself in the process (Isayama, Midnight Sun 22).*

The most notable thing about this page is that Isayama chooses to draw all of the panels here at an oblique angle, reflecting the way he draws Erwin's thoughts and memories in Figure 11. Just like in Erwin's set of memories, Hange's oblique angles indicate her distress in those moments and how fragmented the memories are. She recalls how, when the Colossus Titan

attacks them with a powerful heat wave, Moblit was able to save her life by pushing her into a nearby well. During this process, the reader can clearly see Hange's latest Titan-slaying invention – the Thunder Spears – attached to her arms. When she looks back over her shoulder and watches Moblit die, she briefly goes blind and eventually loses her left eye. After the battle, Hange survives and gains access to Eren's basement, wherein she learns the truth about the Eldian bloodline and grows wiser as a result. Therefore, when comparing her traits to those of Odin, a reader can draw strong parallels between the one-eyed spear-throwing Odin and the one-eyed Thunder-Spear-wielding Hange. This combined with the fact that Hange takes over Erwin's position as Commander of the Survey Corps. therefore calls back to the theory that, over the course of mythological history, Odin eventually replaces Tyr as the All-Father and Ruler of the Gods. I argue, then, that Hange is indeed Isayama's parallel to Odin.

One of the most significant ideas associated with Odin is that of sacrifice. This once again calls back to Isayama's idea of a person needing to be willing to make sacrifices at the right time in order to change their destiny. Additionally, it points towards the idea of a powerful mental transformation being part of that requirement. In Odin's case, in addition to sacrificing his eye to Mimir's well, he hangs himself from a tree for nine nights (Crawford 42). He does all of this so that he may gain wisdom of ancient magic and of the gods' fates. When examined through a critical lens, a reader can see that "the significant element in [Havamal] is that Odin is transformed. Whether or not he is destroyed is of lesser importance" (Schjødtt 270). Essentially, Odin chooses to sacrifice himself by hanging from Yggdrasil, the World Tree, and suffering for nine nights. Because there are presumably no gods above Odin for him to sacrifice himself to, he essentially sacrifices himself to himself. As a result of this sacrifice, Odin learns the secrets of magical runes and emerges from this event transformed, now even wiser than he was before.



Wisdom is also the result of Odin's bargain with Mimir. In both these cases, Odin sacrifices a part of himself – his eye to Mimir and his body to himself - in order to undergo a mental transformation and gain the wisdom he needs to rule the gods and to prepare for Ragnarok. Therefore, it can be said that mental transformations in exchange for a great sacrifice are strongly associated with the All-Father.

In Hange's case, sacrifice for wisdom comes in the form of her service to the Survey Corps. When the reader first meets her, she is introduced as a young scientist who eagerly researches Titans in hopes of learning more about them. She is passionate about her research seems to take it to extremes at times, often nearly being bitten by her subjects or chasing after Mindless Titans in hopes of capturing them for experimentation. Whatever she learns, she shares with every soldier she knows in hopes of helping others better understand how the Titans work and what motivates them to eat humans. In this process, she does gain wisdom in the form of knowing more about the Titans. However, she also makes great sacrifices in exchange for such wisdom. She is a Squad Leader of the Survey Corps., meaning that she also leads a team of soldiers in addition to her duties as a Titan researcher. As is expected when one must lead a group of soldiers, many of Hange's subordinates die fighting the Titans. She even notes in Figure 13 that "ever since [she] joined the Survey Corps., every day has brought a new farewell" (Isayama, *Midnight Sun* 22). Although she constantly gains wisdom on the Titans from her research through the Survey Corps., Hange must make great personal sacrifices to gain such wisdom. Every time the Survey Corps. captures a Titan, it means more soldiers being eaten and more lives being put at risk. Every day Hange spends serving the Survey Corps. is another day where she must accept that she may never see the person she is speaking to again. It is not Hange's nature to completely withdraw from her comrades, but it is also extremely painful for

her to be suddenly forced to say goodbye to them forever. Additionally, the deeper Hange and her team dive into the mystery behind the Titans, the more the enemy Titan Shifters target them. Even when she is not actively looking to increase the amount of knowledge she has on the Titans, Hange must still make sacrifices. The death of her close friend and research assistant, Moblit, is a prime example of this. Moblit saves Hange knowing that, with all the wisdom she has gained and the passion she shows towards learning more about the Titans, Hange is one of the best hopes for humanity. When the battle is over, it is revealed that in exchange for Moblit's life and her left eye, Hange gains the knowledge of Eldia's forbidden history hidden behind the door to Eren's basement.

All of this seems to call back to the idea of a dangerous and sacred wisdom hidden behind a door. In order to gain access to this wisdom, one must be made aware of the risk being taken. Snorri Sturluson's *The Prose Edda* alludes to this notion when King Gylfi, disguised as the wanderer named Gangleri, first enters what he believes to be Valhalla: "Gylfi saw a man in the doorway of the hall. He was juggling short swords and had seven in the air at once" (Sturluson 10). Sturluson makes clear here that the man standing in front of the door to Valhalla is a sentry of some sort, as indicated by his weapons and his position in front of the door. The fact that the weapons are in the air indicate that the sentry is hinting at a threat. The knowledge beyond the door is potentially dangerous to Gangleri, so the wanderer must decide if he will enter beyond the door and risk his life in exchange for greater wisdom. The sentry's juggling is also an important detail: juggling is a trick, so it can also indicate that what lies behind the door is a trick. As shown in Thor's experience with Utgarda-Loki, being the victim of trickery can sometimes yield greater wisdom (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 62). In Gangleri's case, what lies behind the door is both wisdom and trickery, as though he gains the wisdom of the stories told by

the powerful beings behind the doors, he also finds himself in the middle of an empty field once all the stories are done, making it seem as if the hall he was in had never existed at all (79).

Seeing that Gangleri is one of Odin's names and that wisdom is often associated with Odin, it can therefore be argued that Odin is associated with a sacred and dangerous wisdom, one that may require sacrifice – such as one's left eye – to obtain.

Therefore, Isayama shows through the parallel between Odin and Hange that another way to break his cyclic destiny is through mental transformation, or the pursuit of knowledge, even at the cost of sacrificing one's own life, team, or body. As Odin moves closer and closer to Ragnarok, he moves closer towards his destiny of being eaten by the Fenriswolf. He seems to attempt to delay this inevitable fate by surrounding himself with the spirits of the most powerful dead warriors, called Einherjar. This indicates that despite his status as a wise god, Odin chooses to face his fate with violence. He gathers an army of warriors to go out and fight the Fenriswolf, using his skill as a warrior rather than his skill as a thinker to see him through. This causes Odin to be further accelerated towards his death, in the same way Eren's perpetuation of violence accelerates him closer to repeating the same event that destroyed his world years before. Just as Odin begins the world with the violent act of slaying Ymir, he ends it with the violence of Ragnarok. Hange, on the other hand, chooses to meet her fate by pursuing knowledge. Rather than perpetuating a repeating cycle, she instead takes linear steps towards the improvement of humanity. With the knowledge she gains from studying the Titans, Hange channels such learning towards new attack patterns and inventions, such as her Thunder Spears, which are powerful enough to pierce the nearly impenetrable skin of the Armored Titan. Furthermore, Hange differentiates herself from Odin by her own personal abilities, reproduced below from the *Attack on Titan* Guidebook:

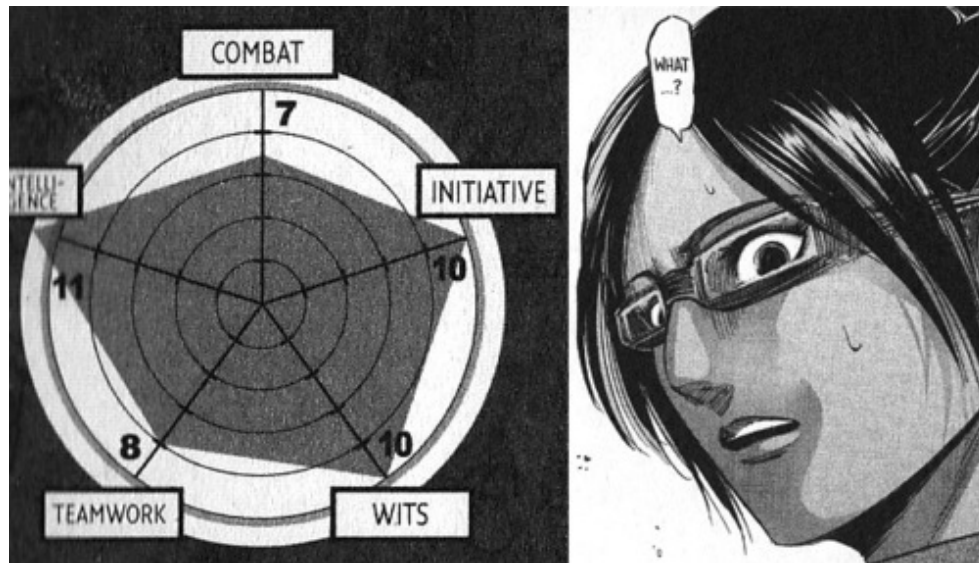


Figure 14. An excerpt from the *Attack on Titan Guidebook* depicting Hange Zöe's statistics. Intelligence: 11/10, Combat: 7/10, Initiative: 10/10, Wits: 10/10, Teamwork: 8/10 (Isayama, *Attack on Titan Guidebook*). Photo credit: momtaku.tumblr.com

Isayama makes it clear here that Hange's most highly-ranked statistic is her intelligence, followed closely by her wits, initiative, and teamwork. Ironically, her combat – though still quite high due to her status as a soldier - is her lowest statistic, a reversal of her more combative parallel. This is a possible reflection of Japanese cultural values, as detailed by Norman Peña Jr.: “Part of Japanese culture is the value, for example, of inner strength and of power not solely in terms of physical force but also in thinking, relationships and team-work” (Peña Jr. 414-415). All of the traits Peña lists are reflected in Hange's statistical profile. Though Hange is indeed a strong character, her strength mainly draws from her intelligence, wit, and initiative. Her combat, though still high, is not as high as the rest of her stats. This points towards an inner strength that, as Peña described, comes from thinking and teamwork instead. Therefore, it is because that Hange differentiates herself from Odin with her pursuit of knowledge that she is able to avoid the fate that her fellow soldiers have met thus far. Hange placed herself in danger numerous times to study the Titans, yet each time she nearly gets bitten by a Titan, she escapes unharmed. Rather than being locked into an unchanging destiny, Hange instead strides forward and makes progress

against the threat of the Titans. In many ways, Isayama shows through Hange that while Odin's army may grow bigger with time, Hange's army grows smarter. That is how humanity begins to have more victories against their titanic enemies, supported by Hange's research and inventions. Essentially, just like Erwin, Hange shows that she is ready to make the necessary sacrifices to help move humanity forward, becoming a monster who sacrifices soldiers in exchange for the sacred knowledge of the Titans.

### **The Choice with “No Regrets”?**

The third and final member of the Norse god triumvirate is Thor the Thunderer, Wielder of Mjölnir, and Protector of the Gods and Humanity. As one might expect, the character who parallels Thor is indeed the protector of humanity and one of the most, if not the most, powerful warriors in all of *Attack on Titan*. However, what is unexpected – and how Isayama manipulates the traits and fates of his characters' parallels to Norse mythology – is that Thor is not represented by the War Hammer Titan Shifter, as one might expect. Rather, Thor is represented by the character Levi, known as Humanity's Strongest Soldier. The two characters are on opposite sides of the conflict depicted in *Attack on Titan* but are nevertheless considered to be the protectors of their own respective portions of humanity. However, in Levi's case, his stronger parallels to Thor manifest in not only his superior fighting ability and status as Humanity's Strongest, but also his steadfast loyalty to the people he cares for. Thor's loyalty to his fellow gods is obvious; when they call for Thor, he comes to help them. John Lindow, in his description of Asgard, places particular emphasis on Thor's role as Asgard's protector (Lindow 61). Furthermore, it is stated in the Eddic poem, *Harbarthsljóth*, “Odin receives the powerful men who fall in battle, and Thor receives their servants” (Crawford 86). This information shows the reader two important traits of Thor's character: he is an extremely loyal and honorable warrior

whose standard men should strive towards and he is the champion of the poor. The phrase “powerful men” could mean men who are literally physically strong, but it could also mean men who are powerful in society. Regardless, Odin can be seen here as a god who is more concerned about sovereignty than Thor, who will take the servants of these powerful men into his hall instead. When taking into consideration that servants are among the lower classes of society, Thor could thus be seen as a god who is protective of the poor. Levi’s parallels to Thor manifest in both his strong loyalty to Erwin and his reaction to finding out that the Titans he slays were once human. Erwin, as discussed before, is intent on finding out the truth of the world he lives in, even at the cost other soldiers’ lives and his own. The night before Erwin’s death, Levi attempts to convince the Commander not to go, going as far as threatening to break his legs to prevent him from going. Despite these threats, however, Erwin remains firm in his choice of going:



Figure 15. Erwin remains stubborn in his choice of embarking on a mission to retake the village of Shinganshina that would most likely cost him his life. Levi reluctantly accepts Erwin’s choice and voices his trust (Isayama, *The Night of the Battle to Retake the Wall* 12-13).

In these panels, Isayama gives the reader several close-up and extremely close-up shots of both Levi's and Erwin's faces, indicating that he wants the reader to focus on their facial expression throughout the conversation. Erwin's facial expression remains steady throughout, with Isayama drawing his eyes staring straight ahead at the reader. This hints at Erwin's perpetual, forward-looking determination towards fulfilling his dreams and achieving humanity's victory. Isayama uses what is called a subjective camera angle for Erwin's panels, meaning that he intends the reader to view Erwin through Levi's eyes. This causes the reader to take on Levi's role in examining Erwin and allows them to draw conclusions about the commander's state of mind as though they were Levi. In these panels, Erwin seems nearly inhuman, which is Isayama's way of showing the reader how Erwin is capable of knowing when it is time to sacrifice his own humanity to progress towards the greater good. On the other hand, Levi's expression remains mostly stoic, yet moves more dynamically than Erwin's. In this set of panels, the Levi's face first shows surprise when he hears Erwin voicing his determination to embark on the dangerous mission, despite the threat to his life from both their enemies and Levi himself. We are given an extreme close-up of Levi at that point, with his eyes widened and mouth open to indicate his shock. Then, Isayama pans out and gives the reader a close-up shot of Levi from the knees up and then one of his face. In these shots, Levi's facial expression transforms from one of surprise to one of disappointment. His face darkens considerably, indicating his distress, and his eyelids and eyebrows drop lower over his eyes. It is clear from looking at his face that Levi is not happy with Erwin's response to his plea to stay behind, but his final line to Erwin shows where his priorities lie: "Erwin... I'll trust your judgement." Levi essentially voices that, though he does not want Erwin to embark on this mission at all, he will trust in the commander and support him in carrying out the mission to success. The fact that Isayama has Levi state his trust for

Erwin, despite his misgivings about Erwin's insistence on going on the dangerous mission shows his loyalty to the commander. He shows that, despite Levi's clear reluctance and disappointment in Erwin for insisting on being part of the mission anyways, he will always first and foremost place Erwin's judgement above all. He will also support Erwin in all he does, even to the point of "releasing" Erwin from their "cruel world" when it comes down to a choice between him and Armin. Therefore, it can be said that Levi's strong loyalty to Erwin is very similar to Thor's strong loyalty to his fellow gods. He trusts in their judgement and comes to help them whenever they need him. Even when the gods are destined to die, Thor continues to fight for them, up until he meets his own death at Ragnarok. This greatly reflects the way Levi continues to fight for and support Erwin, despite knowing that Erwin would most likely not come back from the mission. And indeed, Levi's misgivings are correct; Erwin dies during the mission to retake Shinganshina, sacrificing himself for the sake of humanity's victory.

Another way that Levi parallels Thor is with his concern for all of humanity, particularly the lower class, rather than the ruling class. This is best seen during the anime episode entitled *Scream*, just after Hange enters Erwin's hospital room and announces her findings about the Titans. The Titans, it turns out, were once human farmers and civilians who were cruelly transformed by some unknown force – later determined to be the Marleyans – for some sinister purpose. While most of the people in the room reacted with horror and morbid fascination, Levi's reaction is perhaps one of the most significant:





Figure 16. Levi reacts as he and Commander Erwin learn from Hange and Cadet Connie Springer that the Titans were once human (Kobayashi, *Scream*).

As Humanity's Strongest Soldier, everyone in Isayama's world expects Levi to be the protector of humanity. However, Isayama makes it clear in this scene that Hange's discovery has shaken that very idea. How could Levi serve as humanity's protector, after all, if he slays humans? Levi's shock is once again made clear in this scene with the movements of his eyes: he begins the explanation with a mostly neutral facial expression. However, as soon as Erwin repeats Hange's explanations on how the Titans were once humans, Levi's eyes immediately grow wider, as depicted above. This shocked expression is soon changed, however, into one of depressed realization. Levi leans forward, eyes narrow once again, but now facing the ground. This is in direct contrast of his straight-backed, calm expression from only a few frames before. When he speaks about how he had been killing humans this whole time, he phrases it as a question to show that some part of him still does not believe Hange. The animators choose to draw Levi using three-quarter camera angles initially, as it is the best way to show the character's depth and volume in a two-dimensional environment. However, the camera swoon switches to view Levi at a profile angle. According to Vitor Goncalves, "Normally when shooting an actor you want to see their face by bringing the camera around to the front in order to better empathize with the character and/or see their emotions... whenever the cameraman shoots them from the side in a profile shot, something feels different, it's a little bit 'stranger'" (Goncalves). In the frames proceeding the profile one, the viewer is indeed made to empathize with Levi by seeing his expression change at the news that he had been killing humans the entire time. They are exposed to both his emotions and his personal struggle in those moments before being cut to the profile angle. The profile angle, with how strange it causes the viewer to feel, emphasizes how uncomfortable Levi is in the situation. The viewer is also further brought in to reflecting on how wrong the entire situation feels in general. The man-eating Titans themselves

already look like grotesque humans, and to have the revelation that they were once human who are now forced to walk around consuming their fellow men is an extremely uncomfortable thought. The fact that Levi is slumped down in his profile shot reflects this idea and shows that, though he was initially shocked at the revelation of Titans once being human, he has quietly and somberly already begun to accept his role as a human murderer as well as a protector.

However, Thor and Levi are defined by much more than loyalty to those they protect. In particular, I speak to their heritage. In *The Prose Edda*, the reader learns that Thor's mother is a giantess named Jörð (Sturluson 112). Combined with the half-giant Odin being his father, this would therefore make Thor three-quarters giant, which could partially explain his natural battle prowess and his temperament. This temperament is seen most clearly when he finds one of his goats lamed, as stated by Sturluson:

Everybody can imagine how frightened the farmer became as he watched Thor's eyebrows sink down low over his eyes. The small part of Thor's eyes that was visible was a sight that alone could have killed (54).

Sturluson describes here how Thor is brought into a rage so frightening and potentially destructive that it could have killed a mortal from the sight alone. This is extremely fearsome imagery that is almost exclusively associated with Thor and the giants he fights against. In addition, a similar rage is described in *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, in which a very large son is born into the family, resulting in him being named after a giant that his grandfather once confronted:

When Jokul heard of [Ingolf's trial]. He was furious about it and said that it would be an absolute disgrace if kinsmen of theirs were to be made outlaws in their own lands, and said that Thorstein was growing very old; 'and though we are not well versed in the law, we will render this case void with our axe-hammers' (The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal 249).

From the text above, a reader can see that, like Thor, Jokul is also temperamental and destructive, as indicated by his wish to solve his family's issues by using his axe-hammer. As stated before, George T. Flom believes that passing on a name of a dead relative to a child will allow the dead relative's characteristics to be passed on to said child, thus allowing the relative to continue to live on. In addition, Flom states, "It was very common to give children the names of honored relatives, for the Northmen believed that children would partake of the virtues of the ones whose names they bore" (Flom 61). From this alone, a reader can easily see that Jokul has indeed inherited his large size and giant's temperament from the giant relative for whom he is named. He does not hold any patience for the legal proceedings of a trial, almost scorning the notion in favor of using his axe to end the case. His response to the fact that a kinsman would be brought to trial is fury, similar to how Thor's response to one of his goats being lamed is a nearly destructive anger. Both Jokul and Thor therefore possess this destructive and frightening giant's rage, also known as Jotunsmoð, as a result of their giant bloodline. In Thor's case, he is three-quarters giant, and in Jokul's case, his granduncle. A reader can therefore form a strong image of what such a rage may look like, which in turn lends insight to how a reader might be able to further view Levi as a parallel to Thor, based on his own heritage and his temperament in battle.

Throughout *Attack on Titan*, Isayama keeps Levi's bloodline and family history a secret from his readers. What keeps readers interested in Levi's bloodline is the fact that Mikasa and Kenny Ackerman, two other warriors considered to be the greatest of their respective generations, also share Levi's family name. However, as the story moves further long, Isayama has begun to reveal more and more about the Ackerman bloodline, specifically in terms of what all members of the bloodline share. When speaking of the Ackerman family, Zeke Yeager, holder of the Beast Titan calls them "byproducts of Titan science" (Isayama, *Midnight Train* 19).

Although this is only a brief mention of the history behind Levi's bloodline, it is enough for a reader to know that, at the very least, the Ackermans are either part-Titan or somehow imbued with Titan abilities. He thus becomes a parallel for Thor through his heritage, as Isayama reveals that Levi, just like Thor, is at least partially descended from the bloodline of the very monsters he has sworn to destroy. This close connection with the Titans could possibly lend to Levi's superior fighting abilities and his temperament during battle, as depicted below when he attacks the Beast Titan:



*Figure 17. Levi faces off against the Beast Titan (Isayama, Promise 19).*

As before with Eren's transformation to attack the Marleyans, Isayama draws dynamic lines all around Levi here to indicate movement and to make him seem more monstrous. Unlike

Eren, however, Levi's dynamic lines do not serve the purpose of making Levi seem bigger than he truly is. Rather, the lines are all pointed towards Levi's face, thus drawing the reader towards a closer view of his eyes and mouth. In his study of the comics novel, *La Zizanie*, Charles Forceville studies what he calls "pictorial signals of anger." This includes any visual representation on screen that translates to the audience that a character is feeling angry. Such a list includes portions of the face, such as the eyes and the mouth, in addition to important aspects of the panel, such as movement and the background. Of particular interest for this page are the signs of bulging eyes, wide mouth (indicated by Levi's bared teeth), and position of arms.

Forceville describes bulging eyes below:

... among the clearest pictorial runes associated with anger... here denote a V-shaped brow combined with an enlarged, black pupil located along the edge of wide-open eye(s) *plus* one or both of the following; (i) an extra line under the eyes ("pouches"); (ii) one or two vertical lines between the eyes ("frowns") (75).

Judging by the above definition alone, it becomes clear that Isayama very clearly draws Levi's eyes as bulging and filled with anger. In this close-up shot of Levi, Isayama draws his pupils as enlarged and dark, fulfilling the first portion of Forceville's definition. Underneath Levi's eyes is an extra line, as Forceville predicts. This line seems to draw the reader even closer to Levi's eyes, indicating that Isayama wishes to have the reader focus on them as Levi's battle continues. The fury in Levi's gaze is further evidenced by the creases drawn between his eyes, thus fulfilling all three of Forceville's conditions that would define bulging eyes as a pictorial sign of anger. As stated before, Forceville's wide mouth is indicated by Levi's visible bared teeth, meaning that the captain is acting extremely aggressively towards the Beast Titan. In addition, Isayama further proves Forceville's point about visual anger in comics by also following another observation Forceville makes in his article: the fact that Levi's arms are not

visible in any of his close-up panels (Forceville 76). The lack of arms in these close-up panels once again draws more attention to Levi's face, particularly the fury in his eyes and the aggression in his mouth. Overall, the picture that Isayama draws here is that Levi fights the Titans while locked in an almost berserker-like fury, raining destruction on his enemies wherever he moves. This allows the reader to draw parallels between Levi and Thor, as while Thor expresses his anger through a giant's rage, Levi expresses his through a Titan's rage. In Levi's case, his fury manifests in an extremely violent display of his fighting skill, yet we can see from the image above that his cuts remain clean, fast, and precise. He manages to neatly slice up the arm of the Beast Titan with very little trouble, thus lending to the idea that – like Thor's – Levi's anger is terrifying yet controlled. Thor manages to stop himself from completely destroying the mortals who harmed his goats, whereas Levi keeps his attacks neat and precise. Neither of them fall into an uncontrollable and messy berserker fury. In the end, both men's fighting prowess seems to stem from both their monstrous heritage and their destructive yet controlled fury.

I now turn to the case of Thor's fate as presented in Norse mythology. Despite being the most powerful warrior Asgard has to offer, Thor – like Odin – is fated to lose in battle against one of Loki's monstrous children during Ragnarok. In this case, he will be killed by Jörmungandr, also known as the Midgard Serpent, a monster so large it encircles the world. What is interesting about this, however, is that Thor meets his future killer twice before their final battle: once when he must lift the serpent while it is disguised as a cat and once more when he fishes it up from the ocean. In both these encounters, Thor shows off his strength, and, in the words of the giant king Útgarda-Loki, "everyone that saw it was terrified when [Thor] raised one of the cat's paws" (Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda* 73). There is a sense here of Thor's strength being used to show his enemies that he is indeed a foe to be reckoned with. Where he may have

had a fearsome reputation before, such fear is only enhanced when the giants see his strength first-hand. His two encounters with the serpent also seems to serve as foreshadowing for their final battle; in both cases, he lifts the serpent from its place in the sea, his feats in regard to Jörmungandr becoming more impressive with each encounter. Therefore, there also exists a sense that, until the final confrontation between him and the serpent, Thor's feats must become more and more impressive to move the story along. J.R.R. Tolkien examines this trope in the context of the epic poem, *Beowulf*:

But for the universal significance which is given to the fortunes of its hero it is an enhancement and not a detraction, in fact it is necessary, that [Beowulf's] final foe should be not some Swedish prince, or treacherous friend, but a dragon: a thing made by imagination for just such a purpose. Nowhere does a dragon come in so precisely where he should. (Tolkien 31).

What Tolkien states here is that it is only befitting of the heroic Beowulf that his final feat is his most impressive yet: he moves from defeating the Grendel to defeating Grendel's mother to finally facing off against a dragon in his old age. The pattern that a reader sees here is that Beowulf progressively defeats stronger monsters until he both kills and meets his death at the hands of the greatest monster he could possibly face. Tolkien notes above that if the dragon had come to face Beowulf any earlier in the poem, such as when Beowulf was a young man, then the poem would not be as enhanced with excitement from the battle against the dragon. An enemy prince or treacherous friend would, in Tolkien's view, not have been as fitting or as exciting of an end for a Norse hero like Beowulf. Therefore, when applying the principles Beowulf's three monsters in the context of Thor's three encounters with the Midgard Serpent, we once again find a sense of progression. Thor's first encounter with the Midgard Serpent is him merely lifting it up from the ground in front of a party of giants. It is already an extremely impressive feat, but is soon overshadowed by Thor fishing the Midgard Serpent up from the sea.



In the first instance, neither Thor nor the serpent see each other face to face – Thor only sees a magically disguised cat whereas Sturluson’s text implies that Jörmungandr’s body is only being lifted off the ground, not completely fished out of the sea. However, what is also significant about the first encounter is that Sturluson notes that “from then on [Thor] was determined to find a way to confront the Midgard Serpent, and later on that happened” (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 63). This statement points at the fact that Thor will one day encounter the serpent again. It sets up the second encounter, and partially sets up the third, as Thor is now determined to meet his destiny with the Midgard Serpent. Essentially, Sturluson tells the reader in that single sentence that Thor is indeed fated to meet the serpent again. In their second encounter, however, Thor manages to not only see the serpent face to face, but even throws his hammer at it as it sinks back into the sea (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 65). This second encounter sees Thor achieving a feat in regard to the Midgard Serpent that is much more impressive than him lifting its body. Thor shows his ability to lift its entire head out of the water and lands a blow against it in the process. Although he releases the serpent back into the sea, the reader senses that there will be another encounter to come. Both of the previous encounters lead towards the epic third and final confrontation, described below:

Then the sea will surge onto the land because the Miðgarðr serpent will make its way into the dwelling places of the giants... The Miðgarðr serpent will spit poison and on one side up above him the sky will then split open... [Thor] will fight with the Miðgarðr serpent... [Thor] will kill the Miðgarðr serpent and step forward nine paces through the serpent’s poison (Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda* 81).

At this point, we reach the third and final confrontation between Thor and the Midgard Serpent. Sturluson conveys powerful imagery in this passage, describing how the sea surges onto land and the sky splits apart as the Midgard Serpent makes its way towards Thor. This imagery

plays a significant role in showing how this is the most epic battle yet. In the previous two encounters, a giant deceives Thor by disguising the serpent as a cat, and the Thor deceives the serpent by baiting it with meat. In this third confrontation, however, there is no deception from either party. The battle that follows their final encounter promises to be epic based on the imagery that surrounds their path towards each other. Once again, the mythology matches the pattern of monsters as presented above in *Beowulf*: the Midgard Serpent and Thor face each other in a final confrontation, where Thor fulfills his greatest feat yet by killing the Midgard Serpent, only to die as well because of the serpent's poison. During Ragnarok, Thor charges forward towards the jaws of the serpent, fulfilling his final destiny of killing the serpent before dying as well.

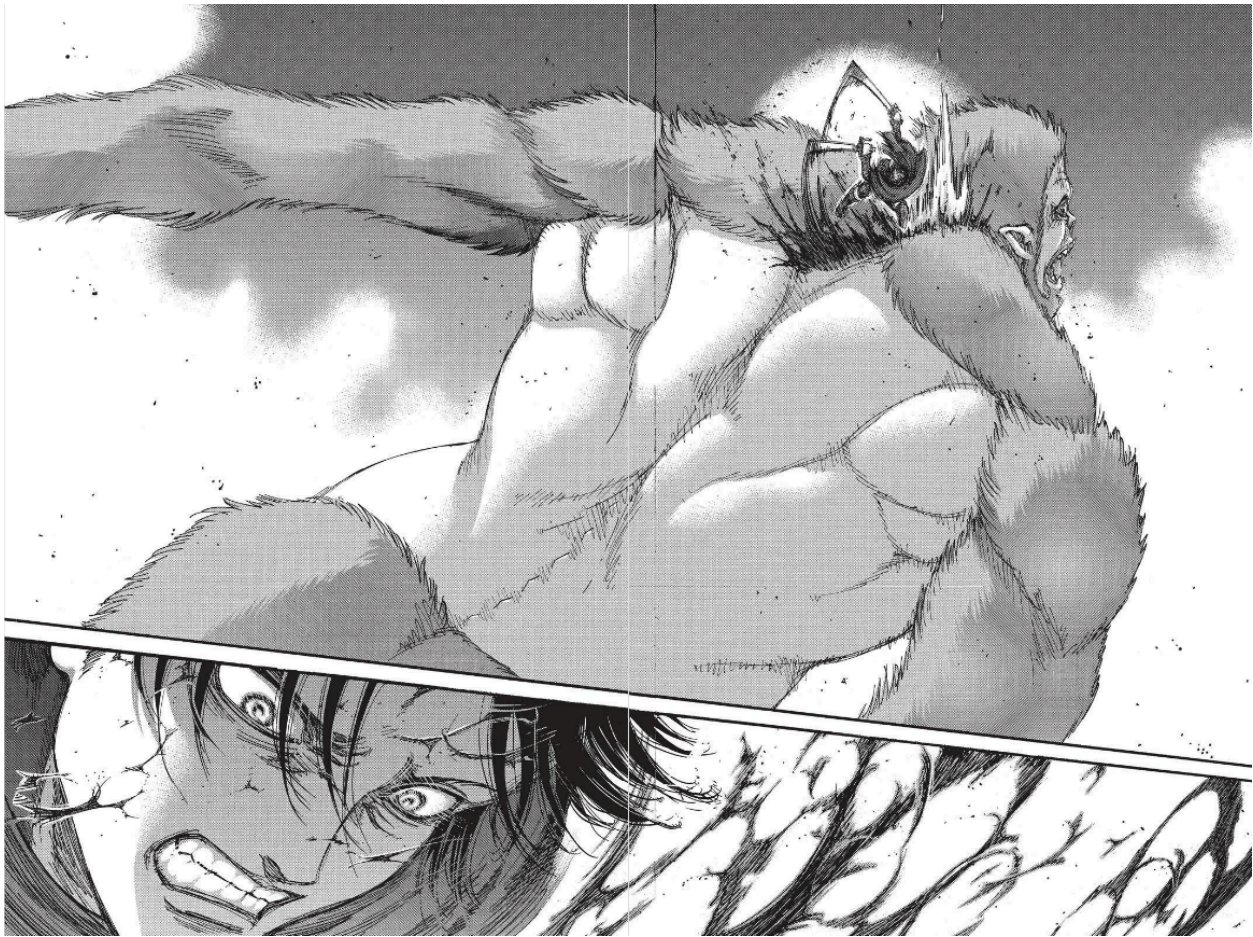
As of Chapter 103 of the manga, Levi's own destiny seems to be following the path of Thor's. In this case, he has thus far encountered the monster that seems destined to kill him twice already, with the sense that a third encounter is coming. The monster in question is Zeke, the Beast Titan Shifter, whom Levi first encounters in the same chapter from which Figure 17 originated, which features Levi taking the Beast Titan by surprise and slicing him up. Unlike Thor, however, Levi's intent with his first encounter with the Beast Titan is not to merely show off his strength. Rather, it is to utilize that strength to kill the Beast Titan. He nearly succeeds in this goal, slicing Zeke so thoroughly that he is forced out of his titanic body. However, what happens next is what leads to their second encounter: Levi hesitates in killing Zeke, thinking that if he could bring Zeke to Erwin, he would be able to have Erwin as a Mindless Titan eat Zeke and give humanity another Titan Shifter. This hesitation costs Levi time and Zeke escapes after the Cart Titan saves him (Isayama, Promise 16-35). This first encounter against Zeke is already extremely impressive: Zeke is stated to be one of the best Titan Shifters at Marley's disposal, and

the fact that Levi is able to nearly defeat Zeke is a testament to his fighting skill. To move the story of Levi's and Zeke's relationship along, Isayama must make each encounter between Levi and the Beast Titan more epic than the last. This must continue until, in a final clash between the greatest warriors of the Marleyans and Eldians, Levi and Zeke kill each other. In this first encounter, Levi manages to take Zeke by surprise, violently destroying his Titan's body to injure Zeke enough so that he would be unable to transform into a Titan again right away. Furthermore, he injures Zeke's human body further so that Zeke would be unable to fight back even in human form. The moment where Levi hesitates is where he must make a hard choice: feed Zeke to Erwin or kill him then and there? That hesitation is what costs Levi his victory against Zeke and forces them into a second encounter years later.

The second encounter comes in the midst of an all-out war, one that started just after Eren transforms into his Titan form in the middle of a Marleyan assembly. As seen before with the patterns reflected in both *Beowulf* and Thor, the second encounter can be considered more epic than the one before it:







*Figure 18. Levi encounters Beast Titan a second time (Isayama, Assault 24-36).*

In this second encounter, the reader can clearly see above that there are now three enemy Titan Shifters working against Levi's side: the Beast, Cart, and Jaw Titans. In addition, though not depicted in the panels above, the Cart Titan is armed with heavy artillery on its back, and Marleyan soldiers are posted at various points around the town they are battling in. Overall, Isayama raises the stakes in this second encounter, now surrounding Levi with an army of human soldiers – the very type of people that Levi swears to protect – and three Titan Shifters. It is therefore all the more impressive when Levi strikes at Zeke once again, seemingly responding to Zeke's taunts as depicted in the first page of Figure 18. Once again, Isayama draws fury on Levi's face, mirroring that of the anger that Levi displays in Figure 17. Furthermore, Isayama

now adds a sense of frantic timing to this panel, as indicated with Zeke's taunts about Levi running out of time and the brief close-up shot of Levi checking a watch. In both of those panels, Isayama draws the reader's attention to time and the watch, heightening the sense that this second encounter will be brief and must happen quickly. The symbol of the watch and the concept of time can also be a hint towards the idea that Levi will not hesitate to go for the killing blow in this second encounter. However, due to the serial nature of the manga, the chapter in which this second encounter takes place is the latest one published. Therefore, it is difficult to tell if Levi will indeed gain a third encounter with Zeke. That being said, when taking into account Zeke's cunning character and the fact that this battle occurs just after a major story revelation of the War Hammer Titan Shifter's true identity and Eren's attack on Marley, there is a sense that Zeke's and Levi's character stories are not yet complete. There is a high chance that Levi and Zeke will both survive this second encounter and move on to their third where. If one were to assume that Levi's destiny would mirror that of Thor, then one could guess that he and Zeke will eventually be the death of each other.

However, if Levi were to follow Isayama's pattern of sacrifice being the way to break a cyclic destiny, then there is a chance that he would be able to escape or survive his final confrontation with Zeke. In Levi's case, the sacrifice he must make is greatly tied to the choice he must make between his own life and goals versus the lives of those he cares about. He makes such a choice three times before his second encounter with Zeke: during his backstory, titled *No Regrets*, during his first encounter with Zeke, and in the aftermath of that first encounter when he must choose between Erwin and Armin who would be saved and turned into a Titan Shifter. As discussed before, Levi chooses to save Armin in that latter choice, thus allowing Erwin to break his supposed destiny by dying peacefully before the series' version of Ragnarok. However, in *No*

*Regrets*, the reader is introduced to Levi before he becomes a soldier and when he first meets Erwin Smith. Over the course of this short side-story, the reader becomes familiar with Levi's two closest friends at the time, Isabel and Furlan. The three grow up in the Underground, the poorest and most desolate part of the lands inside the walls. However, they are offered freedom and citizenship in the innermost wall if they kill Erwin Smith, who at the time is only a Squad Leader in the Survey Corps. They accept the exchange and, after riding into Mindless Titan territory, Levi leaves Furlan and Isabel behind, despite their offers to aid him, to ride ahead and carry out the murder. However, he soon discovers that making such a choice was an enormous mistake. He finds both Isabel and Furlan tragically being killed by the Mindless Titans:



Figure 19. Levi witnesses Furlan's death and realizes that he should have never left him and Isabel behind to go kill Erwin (Isayama, Snark and Hikaru, *No Regrets 2*)

Isayama once again shows here the frantic nature of the moment. As Levi charges towards the Titan reaching for his friend, the reader can see dynamic lines around the “Furlan!!” text bubble, all pointing towards the subject of the panel. This creates movements and allows the reader to immerse themselves in Levi’s desperation. The lack of movement lines in the close-up panels of Levi’s face and Furlan trapped in the Titan’s hand convey the sense that time stands still in those moments, indicating that Levi has reached a realization in regard to the choice he made before. He sees now that he made the wrong choice by moving forward with the plan to kill Erwin and doing so on his own. Had he taken Furlan’s and Isabel’s advice about moving forward alongside them, it is possible that they would not have been killed. Instead, he sacrifices them in exchange for keeping his pride and attempting to fulfill goals, making the “wrong choice” and costing them their lives in the process. Levi does survive this event and eventually becomes the top Survey Corps. soldier and Erwin’s most trusted companion, but in doing so, he accelerates his eventual fate of meeting the Beast Titan. The “correct” sacrifice he therefore should have made in this situation is his personal pride and his cautiousness in dealing with those he cares about: had he been willing to sacrifice either or both of those things, he would have made the “correct” choice in the situation and possibly would have averted or delayed his destiny of facing the Beast Titan. In this way, Isayama uses Levi’s choice and sacrifice to help pave the way towards his encounters with the Beast Titan.

Isayama also uses the second time Levi must make a choice to create a path towards his destiny of facing off against the Beast Titan. In this case, it is Levi’s hesitation in making said choice that starts paving the way towards the second encounter: he fails to make the choice on whether or not to kill Zeke in time, thus allowing Zeke to escape (Isayama, Promise 28-29). In this case, Levi once again makes the “wrong” choice by being unwilling to fully sacrifice the



idea of saving Erwin, despite urging the commander only a chapter before to “give up on [his] dreams and die for [them]. Lead the recruits straight to hell” (Isayama, *The Unknown Soldiers* 28). Levi’s declaration of Erwin needing to die and his subsequent unwillingness to let go of the thought of saving Erwin parallels Ymir’s declaration that she will fight the roles she is given, only to eventually accept her role as a sacrifice. He merely says that he will allow Erwin to die and kill the Beast Titan, but by the end of the day, he only fulfills one of those vows. Levi, like Ymir, is therefore unable to break his fate of one day meeting the Beast Titan again, and he once again loses someone he is close to as a result of the wrong choice. By not giving up on Erwin’s survival, Levi does not make the sacrifice he needs in order to be successful. He could have killed Zeke then and there, but he instead hesitates in the killing, and doing so costs him success. Zeke is therefore allowed to live another day, which in turn paves Levi’s way towards his second encounter with Zeke.

An interesting pattern emerges when one examines the choices Levi has made thus far in the series: the choice to leave Isabel and Furlan behind, the choice to save Erwin, and the choice to save Armin. In all of these instances, Levi must choose between fulfilling some goal or saving the lives of those he cares the most about. In all three cases, Levi chooses the “more selfish” of the options before him: he preserves his pride by going alone to kill Erwin, he renders himself unable to kill the Beast Titan by being unwilling to sacrifice Erwin’s life, and by saving Armin, he dooms humanity (Isayama, *The Basement* 11-13). Levi’s choices therefore represent their own cycle of fate. Every time Levi must make a choice, he seems to make the “wrong” one and it accelerates him towards the next choice. Over and over again, Levi must choose between saving those he cares about and fulfilling some external goal – whether it be killing Erwin, saving Erwin, or saving humanity – and over and over again, he makes the “selfish” or “wrong”

choice and is punished by being forced to endure horrible losses before moving on to his next choice. To break this particular cycle of fate, then, Isayama seems to indicate that Levi must freely choose to make the less selfish choice. This reflects the way Erwin must selflessly give up his humanity to help it progress and the way Hange must selflessly give up the lives of her fellow soldiers and her own eye to gain knowledge about the Titans. By making such sacrifices, they do not continue the cycle of violence and tragedy that Eren and Ymir perpetuate. Just like Erwin and Hange, Levi can only break his cycle of fate by making sacrifices in order to fulfill his goals. He will likely have to make a choice once again sometime during or after his second encounter with Zeke that, if he should choose poorly, may lead into the third and final confrontation. It is therefore up to Levi to choose between making the sacrifices he needs and breaking his cyclical destiny or making “selfish” choice once again and perpetuating this cycle of selfishness.

Levi’s fate may be undecided as of now, but it is because of his fate being undecided that he becomes one of the most significant characters in *Attack on Titan*’s story. As discussed prior, the number three a significant number in both *Attack on Titan* and Norse mythology. We have thus far analyzed two characters who have failed in breaking their cycle of fate: Ymir and Eren. We have also seen two characters – Erwin and Hange – who succeed in defying their Norse destiny. With two characters to fail to break their cycle balanced against two who succeed, Levi would thus serve as the third member of the triumvirate who can decide which direction the story moves.

In addition, because of Levi’s status as Humanity’s Strongest Soldier, one would argue that he is a representation of the best humanity has to offer. If Levi were to fail to make the sacrifices he needs to break his cyclical destiny, he would be grouped with Eren and Ymir. Humanity’s Strongest would show readers that even with his strength, experience, and

willpower, he was not able to defy destiny. At that point, we can interpret Levi's fate to mean that Isayama is saying that humanity cannot make the sacrifices needed to break the cycle of destiny. If Humanity's Strongest cannot break his fate, what hope does the rest of humanity have? Should Levi fail, *Attack on Titan* becomes a lamentation of humanity's lack of strength to fight destiny. Should Levi succeed, however, Isayama sends a much more hopeful message to his readers. He shows through the tripartite of Levi, Erwin, and Hange that there is indeed hope for humanity to define its own future. Levi's success will prove that the balance between man and monster, sacrifice and selfishness, is indeed the best way to break the cycle of destiny. Where Levi's fate, and by proxy, humanity's fate falls remains to be seen. In the coming chapters, we can expect to see Levi eventually making his final difficult choice that either locks humanity's destiny in stone or opens it up to be defined by the careful balance of strength, knowledge, and sacrifice.

### **The Matter of Destiny: A Comparative Approach**

The above analysis therefore brings forth a final question: why would a Japanese author so closely parallel his story with Germanic mythology? As seen earlier with *Dragon Ball* and *Naruto*, Japan is also rich with its own mythology, any part of which Isayama could have used to draw inspiration for his story. However, when setting the values he puts forth in his story with those put forth by Japanese society, we receive the answer: Isayama is taking a comparative approach to his mythology. He is examining the different ways Japanese culture and Nordic culture address the idea of fate and from there applying his own opinion on how such a destiny should be addressed.

Through reading the Norse myths and sagas, a reader sees that the ideal way of addressing fate is to not attempt to fight it. In the case of the gods, they "speak and act like

human beings, but they too are subject to the Norns (the Fate Maidens) and face the inescapable destiny of death... [they] know and accept their fate and are determined to face it with courage and dignity” (Rosenberg 459). Essentially, the Norse myths and sagas convey the idea that the best way to face one’s fate is to simply take it with stoic honor. This means that even if someone attempts to fight their fate, they are merely accelerating along their path towards it or thrashing uselessly against fate’s bonds. If a young woman is destined to sacrifice herself and be viewed as a monster even after this altruistic act, then it is best for her to simply accept that fact and to not attempt to fight it, as it is useless to fight against fate. On the other hand, Eren, who goes and single-mindedly seeks violent retribution against an entire nation for the destruction of his hometown is doing the right thing, because he is charging headfirst into his fate and bringing with him an unstoppable wave of death. He does not fight against his urge for vengeance and thus perpetuates the cycle of violence by bringing violence to the land of his enemies. This allows him to violently end the world of the Marleyans and make way for a new one, thus beginning the cycle of fate once again. For all of their powerful abilities, Eren and Ymir as well as the various fantastical beings presented in Norse mythology are still pawns of their own fate.

In her book, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, Takie Sugiyama Lebra addresses the concept of fatalism and how it integrates itself into the Japanese culture:

According to fatalism, everything in the world is predestined to occur by an endless chain of cause and effects from the unknown past, through the present, to the future, the sequence of which is beyond human control... Resignation, encouraged by fatalism, is also supported by the Buddhist idea of universal impermanence, evanescence, and ephemerality... If one is unsuccessful in his career or in developing a social relationship, he is advised to accept what has happened as inevitable. *Akirame*, “resignation,” is often urged, and *shikata ga nai* (“cannot be helped”) is often said, when things have irreversibly gone against one’s wishes. One’s capacity for *akirame* is often taken as proof of maturity and wisdom (Lebra 165-167).

According to Lebra, one of the ways a Japanese individual might address an unideal fate would be to accept that they were brought to such a fate through a chain of events with unknown origins. This seems to be the stance Ymir takes at the very end of her life by turning herself in to the Marleyans and offering up her Titan Shifter abilities to them, accepting her fate as an individual who would always be seen as a monster. The notion of resignation seems to be reinforced further by the idea of an impermanent universe, indicating there was an underlying belief that the world we live in would not last forever, and that both happiness and misery were fleeting. Therefore, it may seem pointless to attempt to fight against the unwanted fate brought upon them by the endless chain of events that led to that point. It would seem better and more mature to accept *akirame* and face their fate with honor and dignity than to attempt to lash out against it.

This Japanese idea of stoic acceptance is reflective of the Norse idea of facing one's fate with honor and dignity. In both cases, there is a distinct belief of living in a world beyond their control, whether it is due to its inherent cruelty or to a chain of cause and effect that started long before human history. Also, in both cases, there is an urging to accept fate with dignity and to remember that the world they live in is fleeting. Neither happiness nor misery are permanent, and the world will eventually end and be reborn anew. This seems to convey an almost cyclical idea of the world: it is born, it will live for a short time, it will die, then it will be reborn. From there, a series of predestined events will take place that will cause the cycle to begin again. It can thus be argued that Norse and Japanese ideas regarding fate are very similar, yet there also seems to be an important difference: where the Norse seem to believe the idea of an unforgiving world, as addressed earlier, the Japanese instead seem to view the world's events as a series of cause and effect chains. Both view the world as temporary and predetermined, yet the reasons why they are

so greatly differed. Furthermore, while the Japanese belief of the world implies impermanence of all things, the Norse belief presents the idea that there is one thing that does live on after the death and rebirth of the world:

Cows die, family die,  
you will die the same way.  
But a good reputation never dies  
for the one who earns it well (Crawford 30)

From the excerpt of the *Havamal* above, a reader can see that there is a distinct acknowledgement that all things will die, an idea that is very similar to the “universal impermanence” discussed above. However, the impermanence of the universe as mentioned in Lebra’s text heavily implies that nothing lives on forever, whether it is man, concepts, or the world itself. In the *Havamal*, however, we see that Norse beliefs reflect something slightly different. They acknowledge that all things die except a man’s earned and good reputation. There seems to be a strong belief that a man’s well-earned reputation will last forever, perhaps even enduring through the end and rebirth of the world. This is very different from the notions presented by the Buddhist beliefs Lebra mentions and may contribute to the presence of *akirame* in the Japanese culture versus the Norse notion of dying in a personal blaze of glory when something goes wrong.

Isayama incorporates both ideas into his text, indicating that he is commenting on both cultures’ views on how to handle fate. As discussed earlier, his world is filled with monsters that violently consume any human they come across, representing the cruel and unforgiving world seen by the Norse people. Said monsters came about due to a series of events that began when Ymir Fritz first received the powers of a Titan and continue with the Great Titan War all the way up to the newest battle in Chapter 103, representing the chain of causes and effects seen in fatalism. It is stated above that the ideal responses to his world from those two belief systems

would have been to stoically resign themselves to their fate and to face the world with dignity and honor. Isayama, however, holds a different opinion from the Nordic and Japanese values presented above, as seen in the ways he utilizes the various characters within his story who parallel the different gods and giants. Rather than stoically accepting fate or resigning oneself to a seemingly fleeting outcome, he pushes for the idea of freely choosing to sacrifice something in exchange for progress towards a greater goal.

When looking at what allows Erwin and Hange to sacrifice what is precious to them and succeed in changing their fate, one would venture into the realm of comparing the often seen Japanese ideal of collectivism with the strong idea of individualism found in Nordic myth. According to Michael Harris Bond, “Japan is perhaps the most intensely studied exemplar of the collectivist cultural extreme” (Bond 74). Lebra’s text supports this point:

The Japanese concern for belonging relates to the tendency toward collectivism, which is expressed by an individual's identification with the collective goal of the group to which he belongs. Collectivism thus involves cooperation and solidarity, and the sentimental desire for the warm feeling of ittaikan ("feeling of oneness") with fellow members of one's group is widely shared by Japanese (Lebra 25).

According to both Bond and Lebra, collectivism is also a large part of Japanese culture. This means that, as stated above, individuals are concerned about being identified as a part of the group, not as a standout from said group. This comes as a stark contrast to what we find in Norse mythology: the Einherjar are the worthy dead, hand-picked by Odin to serve as members of his army during Ragnarok. In order to be chosen as one of Odin’s warriors, it is expected that the soldier should shine on the battlefield as an individual, not fall in line with other faceless fighters. Furthermore, it should be noted that throughout Sturluson’s texts, he introduces the gods with their own kennings and titles that help identify them as unique from their fellow gods. The

god Bragi, for example, should be referred to as “the husband of Idunn, the first maker of poetry, the son of Odin and the long-bearded god” (Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* 110). It is clear through close examination of Norse myths that each of the Norse gods stand out as individuals, and that the ideal warrior is the one who stands apart from the crowd. Therefore, we must now question whether Erwin’s and Hange’s success were due to their choosing to make the sacrifices required as individuals or as a collective.

When examining Ymir’s and Eren’s failure to change their fates through the lens of collectivism and individualism, something to be noted is that both characters take each concept to the extreme. Ymir represents extreme collectivism. She sacrifices herself for the masses and then proceeds to blend in with them when granted a second chance at life. She does nothing to make herself stand out from the crowd and when it is time for her to potentially fight her own fate, she simply resigns to it and dies. Her legacy is of yet another unknown Eldian who would forever be viewed in death as a monster. Eren, on the other hand, represents extreme individualism. He focuses solely on his goal of eventually eliminating all of his enemies. He shines out on the battlefield as a warrior, but being a warrior quickly becomes so deeply ingrained into his identity and conception of self that he is unable to stop and appreciate the small victories that he is helping his comrades gain. Eren can only focus on the battle ahead, even with the beautiful sight of the ocean right in front of them. Therefore, as seen before with the balance of monster and man, Isayama urges the balance of collectivism and individualism. He says this much through Erwin, the only one of his characters thus far to achieve a peaceful end:

Everyone dies sooner or later. Does that mean all life is meaningless? [...] Were those soldiers’ lives meaningless? No they weren’t! It’s us who give meaning to those soldiers! [...] The only ones who can think of them are us, the living! We will die here and



entrust our own meaning to the next generation of the living! It is the sole way we can oppose this cruel world! (Isayama, *The Unknown Soldiers* 40-45)

Erwin makes this speech just before his final charge against the Beast Titan. He does this to give Levi a chance to kill the Beast Titan and to buy Eren enough time to defeat and capture the Colossus Titan. Throughout this speech, Erwin uses words that invoke the army as a collective. “We”, “us”, and “everyone” are prominent words here, thus invoking the importance of working in harmony as a group against the Beast Titan. However, Erwin also addresses the idea of personal glory. He states above that when his soldiers sacrifice themselves they are earning personal glory and entrusting the meaning of their sacrifices to the next generation of soldiers. From the excerpt of *The Poetic Edda* above, we know that one’s earned personal reputation living on after death is an ideal found in Norse texts. Erwin takes this notion of permanent glory one step further by stating that achieving a strong reputation is the only way one would “oppose this cruel world.” Isayama essentially says through Erwin that it is through balancing all opposing forces within himself – individualism/collectivism and monster/man – and adding the element of personal sacrifice that one can break the destiny laid out before them. Erwin neither falls to the weakness of man nor the vices of his monster. He also neither fades within the collective nor charges forward selfishly. He is a fully balanced individual, ready to make the personal sacrifices necessary to ensure humanity’s victory. Even though Erwin dies, his death was not meaningless. He gives those who come after him a chance to progress towards a better future. He defies the cruel world he lives in and the destiny of violent death set out for him by willingly giving up what is precious to him in exchange for progressing a greater goal. And because of all of this, Erwin achieves what so many other characters in the world of *Attack on*

*Titan* are unable to have: a non-violent death after increasing his personal reputation through a blaze of glory.

### **Historical Allusions and Future Direction**

There is, however, another reason why Isayama, a Japanese author and artist, would utilize German mythology in his work. This other possible reason may trace back to World War II. Throughout Isayama's text, we find various references to World War II, from the design of the characters' military uniforms to the use of armbands to mark Eldians as they wander the streets of Marley. These strong allusions to World War II, combined with the use of Germanic mythology, indicates, at the very least, a cultural impact of the relationship and cross-cultural sharing between Germany and Japan while they were both part of the Axis Powers.

Isayama's allusions to World War II can possibly lead to an examination on how defining a group based on the actions of their ancestors and hating their descendants because of said actions can lead to a culture of fear and oppression. In his world, the Eldians are hated because of the evil actions their ancestors took against the Marleyans. However, Eren hates all Marleyans because of the evil actions they took against his people. This causes the next generation of Marleyans to hate Eren and the rest of the Eldians, leading to another possible attack or war on the other Eldians due to Eren's actions. This perpetuates a cycle of hatred, tragedy, and violence that, in the end, created a world ruled by fear. And in this world of fear, *Attack on Titan's* military reigns supreme, with corruption running deep both inside and outside the walls.

We find a similar parallel in history when examining the causes of World War II. It is well known that the poor handling of The Versailles Treaty was among the most prominent causes of the war. In their book, *The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy: The Failure of the*

*Wilsonian Vision*, Norman A. Graebner and Edward M. Bennett describe the content of The Versailles Treaty:

France pursued a vindictive course in world affairs. Its unrealistic demands for German reparations, followed by its occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, contributed to a vengeful and aggressive nationalism in Germany (Graebner and Bennet 78).

We can already see above a basis of vengefulness being used to pave the path to World War II. France, seeking revenge against Germany for the many battles fought in French countryside, made demands for reparations. The country then proceeded to occupy German land when Germany was unable to meet said demands. The writing and acceptance of these unrealistic demands written in The Versailles Treaty soon created a perfect platform on which Adolf Hitler rose to power, where he “asserted that his lectures on “‘The True Causes of the World War’ and on ‘The Peace Treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Versailles,’ [were] the most important of all” until his followers understood his ultimate objective: the revision of the Versailles Treaty” (Graebner and Bennet 111). Again, we see language here that indicate revenge as one of the primary forces driving the onset of World War II. Hitler states above that his most important lectures were those on the true causes of the first world war and the peace treaties, indicating that he is feeding his followers’ resentment towards The Versailles Treaty. Considering that The Versailles Treaty was one born at least partially out of revenge for Germany’s role in World War I, we can thus argue that World War II was, at least partially, born out of bitterness for the unreasonable demands written in The Versailles Treaty.

We see above a cycle of revenge, as France first pursues revenge against Germany through The Versailles Treaty, then Germany pursues revenge against those who approved The Versailles Treaty. The theme of revenge driving revenge reflects the cycle of violence that Eren perpetuates through his actions against the Marleyans. As discussed with Eren’s character,

Isayama portrays his actions as monstrous, indicating that repaying violence with violence is a highly negative action, as doing so locks both people and nations into a cycle of eternal perpetuation. When applying the theme of revenge to this notion, we find another interpretation: Marleyan revenge against Eldian descendants for their ancestors' crimes propagates Eren's revenge against the Marleyans. Based on these patterns, we can expect in coming chapters the Marleyans' revenge for Eren's blow against them. And thus, as reflected in World War history, the cycle of revenge prolongs itself.

The many historical allusions presented in *Attack on Titan* can potentially lead to another study examining the graphic novel through the lens of a historical allegory. As Isayama's story begins to move towards a close, we can certainly expect more allusions to both Germanic myths and World War II. A possible future direction for this study would be to therefore more closely examine the various allusions to World War II through the lens of how, like we have just seen with the Nordic myths, Isayama is using those allusions to enhance his storytelling and convey his message of sacrifice and balance to his audience.

## **Conclusion**

Isayama seems to say in his graphic novel series that the cycle of destiny cannot be broken without a freely given personal sacrifice. To illustrate this, he presents three cycles: one of tragedy that is perpetuated by Ymir the Second, one of violence that is perpetuated by Eren, and one of selfishness that is perpetuated but can potentially be broken by Levi. Ymir the Second's cycle of tragedy is perpetuated because she completely resigns herself to her fate. She does not attempt to fight the roles she is given, thus rendering the sacrifice of her life useless in breaking the cycle of tragedy tied to her name. When she is given a second chance at life, she chooses to hide amongst her fellow soldiers, refusing to stand out among them until it is too late.

In death, she becomes yet another dead Eldian. Her name does not live on as anything but a reminder to all Eldians that they are descended from monsters. Her Titan also becomes a weapon of war for the Marleyans to use against the Eldians, and she is all but forgotten from that point onwards. For Isayama, she represents the notion of resignation and collectivism taken to an extreme.

Eren's cycle of violence is perpetuated by his refusal to let go of the need for vengeance against his enemies. He does not attempt to back down from the urge to seek out his enemies and destroy them. Rather, he allows that urge to carry him all the way to Marley, where he gives them a grim reminder of how terrifying a Titan Shifter can be. He represents the idea of fighting every step of the way, battling the world he lives in so hard that he accelerates himself towards his fate. He also represents the idea of individualism taken too far. When he charges forward to earn his glory, he does so selfishly. He earns his reputation as a fearsome warrior, but never stops for a moment to enjoy the victories his comrades have already earned.

Levi's cycle of selfishness is thus far the only one that can potentially be broken. He has refused to choose anything thus far except the selfish choices he's offered, thus continuing to fuel the many deaths that surround him with every "wrong" choice he makes. He represents the fear of having to make such sacrifice. However, if he should be able to put aside his own humanity – like Erwin – or if he should accept the potential deaths of those he cares for – like Hange – then there is potential to break the cycle of choices that Levi must continually make. That being said, whether or not Levi will escape his fate remains to be seen.

Ancient though the Nordic myths are, the notion of a predetermined destiny presented in them remains prevalent in our world today. This presents opportunities for such beliefs to be critically examined and discussed. The gods and monsters of Norse mythology also continue to

serve as teaching tools for how one may address this predetermined fate. *Attack on Titan* provides a strong platform for examining how cross-cultural sharing helps create a retelling of the Norse myths in the modern world. In this retelling, the values regarding destiny for both the Japanese and Norse culture are critically examined and discussed through the lens of what factors can contribute to a changed fate. In Isayama's case, his gods and monsters serve as examples of the best and worst ways to fight fate and the "cruel world" we live in. An ideal warrior in Isayama's world will fight the destiny laid before them. They would understand the need to balance the monster and human within them, as well as the concepts of collectivism and individualism. With this balance guiding their actions, this ideal warrior would be able to make the "correct" choices and break their cycle of destiny. Furthermore, they must freely give up something personally important to them – whether it is their loved ones, parts of themselves, or their own humanity - to move towards a greater goal. In doing so, Isayama shows that the cycle of destiny can be broken and meaning can be given to one's sacrifice. Isayama thus uses his parallels to Norse mythology to show how each of his characters can break their cyclical destiny. He has each character adopt traits that match those of their Nordic parallel, and from there shows whether or not they escape their inescapable fate by manipulating their ultimate outcomes and showing whether or not their ultimate fates matches those of their Norse counterparts. In addition, he uses critical commentary regarding Japanese and Nordic principles to define his ideal destiny-breaking warrior.

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